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THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY

BOOK TWO

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THE BORN-AGAIN

The little woman in the simple navy-blue cotton pajamas and spare white slippers leaned over the letter she was writing, writing intensely, the black Bic in her hands with the faded lettering and the chewed cap grinding into the thin sheet of loose-leaf. Long, coarse hair the color of corn fanned out about her shoulders and down her back in waves, released from the tight braid they were usually bound in. She had milky-blue eyes framed by an old, slightly warped pair of small, wire-rimmed glasses, and a liberal dose of freckles dotted her cheeks and the bridge of her round-tipped nose. She was not unattractive, in her own elfin way, but her features were tempered with a hardness; a plaster-like stiffness around the mouth that tended to freeze it grimly in a purposeful frown.

The room she worked in was small, but big enough for her purposes; shelves bracketed above her simple desk and boxes to the right of her bed stored a multitude of books and notebooks, the contents of which ranged from demonology to Christian fundamentalism, a road map of the young woman's passions and hatreds and passions. A tiny portable television in a dirty pastel casing with the brand name "California Style" on it sat on the slightly rumpled white sheets of her twin bed; at night she would get under the covers, rest the warm box on her stomach, and watch her favorite television show, Rev. Rudolph S. White's Blood of the Lamb Hour. All-in-all, it was a pretty decent setup, the bars on the windows excluded.

In spite of the fact that Molly Griep had spent the last six years of her life in a mental institution after an elaborate but inexplicably failed attempt to end the life of her college chum Tara Amadeo with a mixture of Voodoo, sigils from the Simon edition of the Necronomicon, and a kitchen knife, she remained a woman of no small accomplishment. For example, the very fact alone that she had faced the wrath of the Council of Nine and lived to tell about it was quite extraordinary, and if it wasn't for the fact that said encounter left her psyche somewhat pureed

she might have found some use in it.

In the intervening years she had grasped desperately in the air for anything that might have taken on the cause of her grievously wronged person – dedicated herself body and soul to any supernatural agent that would assist her and carry out her burning need for justice. The beginning of her stay at the asylum was focused mainly on the continuation of her magickal works, which had taken a decidedly Satanic turn in the months before her incarceration. But there was only so many times she could invoke Tiamat or have her sacred hexagrams wiped off the walls of her cell before she lost hope in those darkling endeavours. The cause for her numerous failures became obvious to her – it was because the infernal was Tara's realm, Tara the Evil, Tara the Upstart, Tara the Two-Timing Bitch. So Molly was left with no choice but to hook up with the other side and curry favor with Christ, as she did for a period of exactly one year, three months, and 6 days – and during said time, she rattled off quite a number of missives to Rev. White.

Dear Most Holy Reverend,

Hello again, and Praise Jesus! Thanks so much for the letter your secretary sent to me giving your regards. I fully understand how busy you must be what with spreading the word of our Lord and beating back the minions of the Adversary that have wormed their black way through every facet of our society. However, I do have some rather sensitive information to impart, which might necessitate your undivided attention. In my previous letters I had held back much, in the interest of making a simple introduction to you and facilitating a dialogue. I am aware of the fact that since I am being held here against my will that things I say might be initially interpreted as the ravings of a madwoman - such is

the cross I bear (and I praise Jesus for it, because it has tempered my soul). However, if you were face-to-face with the Legion of Satan - not simply the pornographers and the homosexuals and the killers but the actual demonic court of the Adversary himself - would not even the strongest among us have their mind shaken by such an event? But this is just a preamble to one of the most harrowing, real-life stories of facing the Devil Incarnate that you will ever read, and recent events have backed up my claims. I encourage you to read the following and investigate my claims independently for verification. What you will find while doing so will no doubt cast a new light upon The Prophecies and the impending end of the Age (and the beginning of the next?).

The bulk of the first 24 years of my life had been most deleteriously shaped by the demonic forces that Satan has placed in our popular culture, I am ashamed to say. Such occult- and pagan-influenced narratives such as Star Wars, The Lord Of The Rings, the Smurfs, the Care Bears, Motley Crue, and comic books with a solid lack of moral fiber. By the time I was a teenager I had begun to practice the diabolical art of Dungeons and Dragons, which as we both know is the first step down the path of No Return. As I entered college I had denounced Christianity and our most Sacred Lord as puppets of the white patriarchy and turned to Earth-based (read: Satan-based) religions such as Wicca (which is of course just a front pimping for the Adversary) and misguided embracement of the

Celtics and the attendant Druidism that follows such a lusting after pre-Christian barbarian cultures. But though I had both feet planted firmly in the Kingdom of Moloch, I did not quite reach the depths. It took the entrance into my life of an actual emissary from the charnel pits of Hell to effect such a devastating corruption upon my person.

When I first met Tara Amadeo she seemed like an unassuming, quiet, nerdy, harmless individual (which obviously is how the devil snares you in). If the name sounds familiar to you at all, it might be due to her connection with the Kinky Witter murder - she apparently cursed the man (who was himself an known homosexual and promulgator of Satanic influences) with the cards of the Tarot (gateway of Satan) immediately before he died. Though the actual woman who shot Witter is in custody, I have no doubt in my mind that Tara's demonic aura led directly to this man's death. It is said that her and Witter had a disagreement over payment (whoredom - more on that later) in those final hours of his life - need I say more? Self-avowed witch (bride of the Goat) and astrologer Tara Amadeo is no mere practitioner of the Satanic Arts, however. She is the Whore of Babylon who rides upon the Beast in the Revelations. Now, I know you are thinking: what a fantastic claim to make! I'm sure people of piety and faith the world over have been searching for the identities of the exact players of the End Times - who am I, a humble and simple woman as myself, a sinner - who am I to say such things, to

find the Answer? I admit it sounds pretty crazy to myself, yet I know through communication with the Redeemer that indeed my fears are correct.

*But back to my narrative. Shortly after meeting and befriending this Tara Amadeo my life began to fill to the brim with the blackest of demonic possession - funny thing was, I had no idea where it was coming from! I began to be enraptured with the occult film *The Sweet Hereafter*, the late actor Rob Sullivan (who as I'm sure you had heard, died many years ago in a tragic accident while making the film - which, I am very sorry to say, might have been his divine "payback" for starring in a movie with Satanic themes), and the idea of vampirism. While the character *Sweet Hereafter* was not a vampire per se, but rather a corpse reanimated by Satan (are your ears burning yet?), he was enough likened to a vampire, in his pale, cold, sensual form and full, juicy, blood-red lips to get me enamored with the entire vampire phenomenon. Soon I was purchasing Anne Rice paperbacks, wearing black (Satanic color), and had a pair of fangs on order from a supplier in the UK. But such trappings and fancies - while vortexes of the black forces and desires of the Adversary - were not satisfying enough for me, they were mere toys. I wanted to BE a vampire, I wanted to couple in unholy carnality with the *Sweet Hereafter*, drink blood, and learn all the secrets of the Satanic Mass. Meanwhile, Tara Amadeo, in her mousy, characterless, mincing, utterly annoying way, simply hovered in the*

background, apparently harmless. Little did I know!

You see, Most Holy Reverend, while I was admittedly a follower of our hated Adversary at that point, with my back coldly towards our Savior and my face full in the ass of the Beast - it was due to an influence OUTSIDE of myself. When I was born - sure, I had original sin, because we all are miserable sinners in the eyes of the Most Holy. But the REAL ME, who I was as an infant and toddler and beyond, was a Child of God. I was not born with demonic abilities to cast spells and invoke the Goetic demons - that was something I picked up later on due to being forced to read occult texts by Satan. Tara, on the other hand, was and is a demon from since the cradle. She feigned a sort of "amnesia" about her former life when I met her, and presented herself to me as this oh-so-innocent normal everyday woman. But in reality she was a natural-born witch and consort of Satan, pure and simple. While I can repent and be reborn in the waters of our Sacred Redeemer (praise!) Tara can NEVER do that, because she is an actual fallen angel sent by the Adversary!!

I ask you - nay, beg you to investigate the figure of Tara Amadeo in more detail for yourself, that you might be convinced. It is my solemn belief that me and Kinky Witter (though in a way he brought about his own destruction by promoting a homosexual lifestyle) are not the only ones that have been corrupted and trampled upon by this Black Sorceress. I bet my miserable life (humble in the Light of the

Lamb) that an entire trail of tears and utter ruin can be tied to Tara Amadeo, a chain of wasted and destroyed lives, and that such a path can only lead to the End. Perhaps if she can be stopped in time - we might be able to prevent the Tribulation? I know it sounds crazy, but once you look into this matter for yourself, once you become witness to the most foul and unholy black magicks of this Whore of Babylon, you will be convinced. And there is no chance she can be redeemed, since she is spawned from the Adversary's seed directly - you could no more bring her back into the Light of Jesus than you could Baal or Moloch. I'm afraid that death is the only way for her - or rather, destruction, death being a term used for beings with souls. I wouldn't know how to do it exactly, as she is very tricky - but with the God's Army that you are forming to protect the Believers during the End Times, I'm sure we would have enough soldiers for the job.

I would also like to mention that I was very moved by your sermon last week on vampires. I know a lot of people don't believe in vampires - I myself have never encountered one. But if you say they exist, your Word is good enough for me. If demons can exist (as we both know they can!) then shouldn't vampires exist, too? I would very much like to meet a vampire for real, face-to-face. (So I could spit in his face and proclaim the Victory of Jesus!)

In closing, I would like to repeat my belief in the identity of the Whore of Babylon and plead that you give this matter

some consideration. If we can destroy the Whore, we will be one step closer to preventing Satan's Ultimate Plan. I admit with great sorrow and regret that I was provided the ability to do so, but backslid.

*Christ's Servant, and your humble tele-parishoner,
Molly Griep*

Molly suffered several setbacks in her Born Again phase, among them the failure of God to completely destroy Tara Amadeo. One day she effortlessly slid out of her Faith and down into a place that transcended religion or belief in the supernatural. The way her life had turned out – not allowed to have shoelaces, her greatest enemy still breathing, never being able to nail that cute Goth boy from the library – it could only mean that there was no God, no Divine Plan, and, most disappointingly of all – no magick. And so Molly became an Athiest, and the whole world could end for all she cared.

However, one day, while having to endure yet another therapy session with yet another busybody know-it-all psychobabbler, Molly – for some reason yet unknown to the Cosmos – experienced an odd sort of breakthrough. Her latest shrink, this middle-aged black chick with the dreads and the “spiritual” sort of costume jewelry that looked like it was shaped by the quivering hand of one of the inmates, put her pen down firmly on the table and asked the blond a very pointed question.

“Molly, do you know why you’re here?”

Hmm, Molly thought, her large, impassive blue eyes hemmed in and made smaller by her granny specs. *She looks an awful lot like Guinan from Next Gen.*

“Molly? Molly, can you *hear* me?”

Tommy, can you hear me...

“Molly – *focus*. C’mon. Why are you here?”

Why am I here?

“Why am I here?”

“Do you know what you did?”

“I – I tried to kill Tara Amadeo,” the young woman said, as if in a dream, searching out the words and saying them matter-of-factly. “But I failed.”

“Molly, why are you here?”

“I tried to kill Tara Amadeo, my friend from school,” Molly replied, her voice a hair louder, a hair agitated at the senselessness of the repeated question, a question repeated as if she had never answered the first time, as if the answer didn’t quite count. “I didn’t *want* to do it – but she was turning *evil*. I tried to save the world – but I failed. I tried to teach her, to guide her, but she wouldn’t *listen* to me. She was growing too powerful. So I tried to kill her. But I failed. I failed because Tara is not like you or I – she is an Immortal, albeit a deeply flawed one. I tried to kill her, and I’m sorry.”

“Molly, why are you here?”

The blond turned on her interrogator in a fury, her elfin face grimacing in a mask of hatred, azure eyes narrowed into threatening slits behind their perfectly round lenses.

“Dammit, *bitch* – I told you! Are you trying to cure me or drive me fucking insane?! I told you – I told you! I fucking told you!”

The older woman seemed not the slightest jot taken aback by Molly’s outburst – she simply clasped her hand over Molly’s, bangles rattling, and looked at the patient with pity.

“Molly, do you ever wish that things had turned out...*different*?”

*** **

Apple-flesh crunched softly as the heavysset woman with the long auburn hair, streaked with white, poked the dry end of a purple incense-stick just far enough to hold it in place. Five sticks, five seeds, the bottom half of a red delicious cut perfectly through the middle, the five ovaries of the fruit forming the basis of the cult of five, celebrated by Celts upon the riotous green a thousand

years ago and--as above so below, as before now and again – by the two proprietors of the new-age shop on 7th and Sterling, in the stillness of an area that shut down after 7:00, the rippled armor of storefront gates, the eerie calm of a frontier town that expects the outlaw posse to arrive just in time for dinner and, in so expecting, locks themselves up tight in their brownstones and pops a CD or tape in a machine and calls it a night.

Lucy was able to afford the place that would become HedgeWhich because a) it was directly next to a funeral parlor, b) several decades ago a plane slammed into it, and c) the money she had saved between the time she left the man who almost killed her and when she got the idea to move out to Brooklyn and open a pagan supply-shop was just enough to secure the space, just enough money perfect down to the dollar. It was meant to be. And it was clear to her that this spot was on an area of geopathic stress, of mystical tomfoolery and Lokiesque signage, interesting in the Chinese sense, a repository of unexpressed emotion and hatred and fear – that she had no choice but to move her sizable butt over to this spot and sit right down and light candles and meditate and do whatever it took to keep it all together. What a surprise it would be for Lucy to know that the old Haitian lady in the Botanique directly across Flatbush Avenue, among the bottles of hand-mixed powders and the plastic saints and the Seven Indian Potencies Room Spray, was doing the very same thing – and further, that Tara Amadeo, Lucy's best customer, had shuttled across Flatbush between the two stores like an umbilicus, trailing each woman's energy into the other's field like pollen drifting off the hind-legs of a bee.

Lucy stared into the flame of the yellow candle with her good and bad eye, one so flawless and blue and direct that it looked like the shining orb of an imperious goddess, the other grayer and twisted to the side, limp, dead.

Her voice was husky, serrated by years of smoking, and though her partner was just outside the back-room where they kept the extra stock and the safe and where they performed their rituals, Lucy wasn't addressing her, she was muttering to herself and to whoever else understood in that clear clear sense and could help.

“Something bad’s gonna start happening, something’s not right.”

*** **

The girl was around 14, short blond hair pulled back with unlicensed Powerpuff Girl barrettes to reveal brown roots; she was knowledgeable enough about magick to pick the red candle specifically, to request the herbs that would be necessary to win the heart of the walking jumble of hormones and meat that sat two seats down from her in History.

(The names rolled off Lucy’s brain automatically, like all 50 states: basil, betony, cinnamon, lavender, clove...)

No doubt she was in possession of some pop-Wicca handbook such as Miss Spellcaster’s Guide To Sexy Sultry Love Enchantments, or maybe not even that, maybe she studied the glamour scene from “The Craft” frame-by-frame and enthusiastically copied down all the words, every phrase from mindless banter to spell to every nuance of the actress’s speech patterns – something, *anything* resembling religion, as much religion as could be packed in the few years before she abandoned the Religion entirely and concentrated on acing her SATs and engaging in the full-time tango that was mating in a straight world.

But correct candle hues and sacred movie quotes would not be enough. The teenager would want *tarot*, so that she could keep constant tabs on the progress of her workings and fate she knew was out there, *waiting*...

“I want to buy a deck of tarot cards,” she said blandly, resting her fingers slightly on the glass counter. “How much?”

Lucy took a deep breath and began the speech.

“Well, first you have to sample a bunch of them, look through the decks, see how each one makes you feel...”

Lucy led her to a rack filled with worn, open decks, each one bearing a handwritten, taped-on label: SAMPLE.

The girl frowned.

“I just want to know which one works the best.”

“They...they’re just *vehicles*, you know? It doesn’t matter which one you choose, the power is in you.”

This language was muddy, undefined, and the girl’s frown grew, and she did what was suggested, which was look through the decks, but already the pit of insecurity had begun, already the resentment towards this old, weird-looking woman had begun and Lucy knew it, and at times like these, she wondered if having such a shop as HedgeWhich was a good idea at all – if somehow the revelation of magick was to be done carefully, controlled, to a select number. Rather than maintaining an occult candyshop for those children of all ages starved for the spiritual and armed with the satin-lensed images from dozens of fictional sources that beckoned the potential pupils to a life both voluptuous and eternal. And at that moment, when the girl had come back to the counter and dropped the threadbare deck of Vampire Club Tarot cards down with a victorious thump that rang stinging in the woman’s ears, Tara Amadeo stumbled through the doorway.

“I’m drunk, I know, I’m sorry,” she announced as if conjugating a Latin verb.

The woman was wearing a purple Mandarin dress with red wine stains and various residues – a piece of asparagus still attached to the fabric in a dark, murky green. Her hair was messy and clumped-up in parts, and some residues appeared to be attached to the unruly brown mane as well. And she *stunk!*

The girl at the counter balked at the stench and put her hand to her face.

“*Day-amm!* What are you, homeless?”

Lucy’s partner Steph instinctively stopped inventory and emerged from the back room, her skin tingling in alarm at the sound of Tara’s voice and the comment by the girl; she was thick and rather masculine-looking, and though of average height her combat boots and crew cut made her seem quite the gladiator. Her large frame braced itself to throw the inebriated sorceress through the front window, if need be, for though Lucy was the more readily powerful, Tara’s abilities snaked thin but strong to sources uncharted, chaotic, an unmastered, and the key, in Steph’s view, was to pummel her unconscious

before she could flip the switch. Because of course, as everybody in magickal circles in the five boroughs knew, Tara was a magnet for trouble and had the temper of Kali suffering from premenstrual syndrome.

But surprisingly, Tara didn't confront the girl at the counter for her disrespect, didn't make roach eggs pour out of her ears or curse her family for five generations. Indeed, the woman seemed a bit oblivious to existence in general, dazed as if someone had soaked her morning OJ with a coffin of Xanax or smacked her upside the head with a frying pan. Still, Lucy knew they would have to be cautious – especially with the strong current of chaos she picked up only twenty minutes before.

"Hello Tara," Lucy said, trying to remain calm, hoping her tranquility might set the energy level for everyone in the store at that moment.

"I just killed somebody!" Tara mock-cheerfully blurted out.

Steph's fingers slowly curled into a fist. Lucy turned white, frozen. She did a quick scan of Tara's aura, and it was clear she was not a murderer – though the weight of karma and guilt weighed heavy in dull noxious gray clumps all around her.

"You didn't murder anybody, Tara – I would know if you did. Murder is easy to see on a person, if you got the Sight."

Tara crushed her eyelids shut tightly and exclaimed in a voice more desperate than indignant: "I did TOO murder somebody!"

Steph walked out from behind the counter and faced the disheveled witch, blocking her defensively from Lucy. "Luce, let me just get her out of here..."

"Steph, she's not a murderer."

"No, I *am*," Tara interjected, pointing a finger dangerously close to the larger woman's nose.

"She may be not a murderer – -but she's a *menace*, don't you see that? Having left-handers like her in here is going to get this whole place condemn--"

The woman in the filthy dress let out a bitter, tremulous peal of laughter; she balanced on her toes so that she was looking down on Steph, so close that she made her wince at her reeking breath.

“Ah, get yer broomstick outta yer ass! Hey, Mack Truck called – they’re suing you for infringing on their likeness!”

It seemed as if Lucy’s sight skipped several film frames and jumped to the part of the film where Steph’s hands were planted firmly in the clammy neck-flesh of Tara Amadeo. Tara didn’t fight it but rather hung limply like a jacket from a peg; she didn’t see much need to fight it, such a situation seemed accurate enough.

“*Gek-gek-gek*–“ Tara said.

And in the midst of the slapstick the crisp, icy voice of the girl at the counter pierced through and poked Lucy in her eye. And it was her *good* eye, dammit.

“Hey, are you *listening* to me? *I want to buy this deck!*”

A change had taken place in the girl, it was in the eyes and the voice – a cruel, intensely cold sensation, and Lucy’s eyes flickered down to the cards that had leaked out from the thrown deck, spilled across the counter. And as she took in the baroque, almost luminescent quality of the illustrations, a terrible feeling gripped her...

King of Cups: a middle-aged man dressed in women’s clothing, his brains blown out and oozing from one side, spongy tissue suspended in the air like dirty-pink clouds.

Ten of Swords: a tall blond female vampire nailed to the wall with 9 of them., the tenth stuck through her mouth

The Devil: a close-up of a crimson-haired female vampire’s cruelly yet laughing face, dark brown blood staining her nose and mouth like sloppily devoured ice-cream.

King of Swords: a warrior slays a red dragon, weeping.

The Fool: plainly Tara, as she was there, in the shop, in a purple Mandarin dress – like a Polaroid.

Lucy blinked at the last card, looking up at the pathetic witch hanging from Steph’s hands and then returning to the card, squinting at it with her one good eye in disbelief...the manifestation of the unreal in the realm of the real never

stops placing the hair at the back of one's neck on edge, never stops touching you with a cold hand, even if you were as experienced in the occult as Lucy. The dissonance infected the older woman's brain, but, as she would say, infected her in a blessed way, for now she was cutting through the carnival and getting to the truth—

“Steph! Put her down!”

The large woman let Tara go and down the witch dropped, down and skittering backward like a crab.

Lucy picked up the tarot deck.

“Steph, did you order this?”

“No...”

“Steph, I didn't order this deck. Do you remember unpacking this? Did we get this as some promotional item?” Lucy held up the Fool card. “And does *this* look familiar?”

Fear prodded the middle of Steph's chest, and in her view the deck that Lucy held began to take the horrific cast of a greasy millipede's unscheduled appearance from out of the ether.

“I-I never saw that deck in my life, until now...not even in the catalogs.”

The teenager tapped her pink fingernail on the counter impatiently.

“Well? I want this deck, go get it for me. Hel-lo?”

Lucy swept up the cards with her right hand and subtly withdrew them from the girl's reach.

“Can't. These are the last ones, and we have to reorder.”

“That's okay,” the girl replied in a sharp, clipped voice. “I'll buy the sample.”

“Not for sale. I'm sorry.”

The girl's face twisted in disgust and hunger.

“Look, I'll pay you anything you want for it, *see?*”

She started emptying out her brown plaid Chocokat wallet out, silver raining down, hurling tens and twenties as plentiful and unloved as lettuce leaves.

“She told you, it’s not for sale,” Steph said irritably, forgetting all about Tara, who had huddled in the music aisle and selected the “Meditation and the Beach Boys” CD from the sample machine.

The girl made a grab for the deck, her little thin fingers like a rake.

“Give me the fucking cards, you big dyke!”

The sound of “Good Vibrations” as done with synthesizer, wind chimes, and the coo of a manatee filled the store.

Steph placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Okay, cool off, why don’t you just go home--“

“Get your hands off of me, you fucking lesbo! What do you want to do, *molest* me? We all know what you do here, we know all about you, how you kidnap little kids so you can have your *satanic orgies*, we *know*...fucking devil-worshipping dyke child-molesters! I know how you work with the blacks to cast voodoo on all the innocent children, selling them crack and then molesting them! Just give me the fucking cards and everything will be fine, just give me the motherfucking cards, BITCH!”

A tiny “holy shit” fell from Steph’s lips.

“*Dykes!* Fucking dykes with your hands thousands of fingers to molest, ungodly sinner satan, I know I know, ungodly raping and sex-orgies pornographer dykes!! Dykes!! *Sinners!!!* And faggoty asses stupid dykes devils – and I’m *above* all that, because I’m a *vampire*, I’m *immortal* – “

The girl’s face was dark like a bruise, arms bolt straight and tense beside her, fingers bent like talons. A tiny lump of foam perched on her lower lip.

“DYKES DYKES FAGGOTS BUGGERING BUGGERING FUCKING NIGGERS CRACK ADDICT VODOO SINNERS SATAN MOTHERFUCKING, AND I’M A VAMPIRE, A VAMPIRE, A FUCKING VAMPIRE SONOFABITCH CRACK WHORE HOLOCAUST SUICIDE I’M A VAMPIRE – DYKES! SATAN-WORSHIPPER SATANIC FUCKING SHITTERS GONNA BURN YOU ALL DOWN THE PIT! GIVE ME THE FUCKING CARDS!!!! AGGGGHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

“Holyshitholyshithilyshit...” Steph breathlessly chanted to herself, as Lucy

disappeared into the back room and Tara puked on the CD sampler.

“In My Room” started to play, dolphins squealing lazily to the mellow beat as if they had toked up during the recording session. By now the girl was just screaming, though the intonation was more like that of several adult women being slowly devoured alive by razor-tipped ferrets than a child. Tara had completely disappeared into a foggy realm, contemplating a partially-digested mussel that stuck to the shoulder of her dress, keeping time with the dolphins with a wistful “squee...squee...squee...”

Lucy tossed the deck into a large metal cauldron and doused it with lighter fluid. There wasn’t even time to think up a good spell. She just flooded her brain with “begone” as the cards incinerated, bent and curled under the flames. The smell was like burning hair.

The teen stopped screaming and the blood drained from her face. She looked dazed but calm and somewhat guilty, and Lucy watched from within as she waved goodbye to Steph and slowly, carefully walked out the door, and as Steph gathered up the girl’s money and wallet and ran outside after her to give it back.

Lucy was alone with Tara. “God Only Knows” was the next on the playlist. Tara regarded the approaching woman with a dull grin.

“What’s going on, kiddo?” Lucy asked in a softer, maternal voice.

Tara looked up at her with tired, darkened eyes, mouth bent regretfully.

“Kinky Witter’s dead.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Have you seen CNN?”

“Me and Steph don’t watch that cra—*stuff*.”

“CNN names me as the fortuneteller he saw right before he died. They’re insinuating I was angry at him and cursed him with some black magick voodoo spell.”

“Well, *did* you curse him?”

Tara looked away uncomfortably and fidgeted with a brass candle-snuffer.

“I don’t know.”

“Tara – you either know or you don’t know.”

“Magick doesn’t work like that...”

Lucy’s face hardened as she slapped her palm against the side of one of the shelves in frustration, little tin Day of the Dead dioramas and plaster angels shaking on a nearby wall.

“Dammit – it *has* to work like that, Tara! You have to make sure it works like that, that you’re in control of it and not the other way around! *You* ride the train – it doesn’t ride you!”

The brunette sighed in response, throwing up her arms and letting them fall back down again to her sides like sticks. “I didn’t curse him. At least not consciously. And to curse someone to the point of death – God knows I’ve been tempted with some bastards, but I never did it. But what if it didn’t matter if I cursed him or not? What if I just radiate misfortune like a black cat?”

Lucy’s good eye looked at Tara sympathetically,

“Tara...I know that in the occult we attach a lot of significance to coincidences and signs...but not everything that happens is related to you. Sometimes bad things just happen.”

“But what if...I’m just some nexus for chaos and bizarrness, you know? Because of all the magick I’ve done over the years?”

“Well...you do perform a lot of unprotected magick, Tara, that’s no secret around these parts. I’ve been telling you for years that you need to set up barriers and shields before you do workings – but you just treated it like advice from an *old fart*...”

Tara rolled her eyes and grinned in embarrassment like a little kid. “C’mon, *everybody* does it unprotected these days.”

“All the new generation maybe,” Lucy replied with distaste. “Chaos magickians, Discordians, hotshots, dabblers. Maybe that’s why I’m picking up so much static lately...” Lucy’s countenance suddenly fell serious. “Something’s going down, isn’t it, Tara? Do you feel it? The tide of *chaos*?”

Tara slid to her knees and rested her eyes in her palms, exhausted. “I wouldn’t know, I’m always feeling chaos...and I’m getting burnt out. Maybe it’s

time to get out of the business, the whole scene – just putting away the candles and burning the grimoires and moving out of New York entirely.” She looked up at Lucy. “But I just don’t know how to do anything else! And every time I get out, something always pulls me back in! It’s like some force is keeping me in this infernal mix, telling me that I’m essentially damned anyway like a character out of a Lovecraft novel and why fight it? That I’m just this evil, satanic witch at heart, and that no matter how much I try to change, it’ll all be pointless...” Her fingers strummed the spines of the tomes in the bookcase beside her, instantly recognizing the titles; “Fluffy Wicca,” she had referred to the books, accusing Lucy so many years ago of exclusively stocking her store with saccharine New Agey tripe and ignoring the real magick, the Black Books, the texts that would get results. Tara always got results, even now in her late twenties, when the magick wasn’t as predictable, when the glamours became harder and focus more scattered, when the biggest results arrived only when she was at her lowest ebb and the Force decided to ride her, when the train plowed into her and held her aloft–

“I wish my magick could be less dark. More positive, less chaotic. But I wouldn’t even know where to begin – every time I try to do something good with it, it turns to shit.” Tara said bitterly.

“Maybe the only way is to just not do it,” Lucy said carefully. She eased herself beside the woman on the floor with some delicacy, arthritic bones creaking. “It’s possible that the magick is so tainted at this point with impurities that your only option is to halt it entirely.”

*** **

“That bloody fat-assed old bat said WHAT?!”

Malcolm Dust looked up acidly from a pile of chains and manacles that were piled on the floor, a stack of white hand-written price labels beside them. Business at Lord Of Illusion had certainly picked up since he began carrying escape items, though he strongly suspected that the extra customers were

simply bondage aficionados trying to buy their gear out in the open. At the same time, business was waning on the occult items and the regular clientele had become even more dotty, his customer base stagnant and inbred. It was effecting all the specialty stores right off of Soho, but magick in general was on the decline, while magic retained its hobbyists and the smattering of the merely curious. Many of the witches and warlocks that he knew actively rejoiced at the new paucity of novices and wannabes in the occult, with their high-falutin' notions of "purity" and "weeding out the non-committed" – Malcolm felt they should just take a torch to his store and be done with it, good-for-nothing bastards.

And then fucking Lucy Holloway had to stick her grubby rug-munching moon-worshipping two cents where it wasn't wanted. He felt as if it as a personal attack against him, to be sure. None of her fucking business – none of her fucking business!! She never liked him, hated him because he was a Luciferian and not some phoney foo-foo tree-hugger like her. Accused him of poisoning Tara's mind, of creating some sort of magickal "monster." The rheumy-eyed old twat even implied that he had taken sexual advantage of Tara - which was bullshit. *Bullshit!* He hadn't the slightest bit of sexual feeling for that mop-headed pseudo-lesbianic impudent ill-mannered loudmouth. Besides, he enjoyed having his dick attached to his groin right where it belongs – *thank you!*

And why did Tara insist on wearing those too-tight stretch buttoned shirts with no bra and her nipples like that –whywasshealwaysbotheringhimathisstore?!

"But look, maybe she's *right*, Malcolm," Tara said as she covertly snuck a cigarette out of her back pocket. "All my magic does is create chaos..."

"You cottenheaded nit! Don't you remember anything I've taught you? Can't you see she's trying to run you out of the Craft?! I never met one sorceress, wizard, Theosophist, spiritualist, or astrologer that didn't hate the competition, that didn't feel that they and only they deserved to harbor the Secrets. A more back-stabbing, knavish, unscrupulous pack you will never meet..." Malcolm paused his spittle producing rant for a heartbeat and pointed at Tara. "...and don't forget, *you're* one of them!"

"But I don't *want* to be like that anymore..."

"I don't want to be like that anymore," he repeated mockingly, holding his index finger vertically under his chin. "Last week you were asking me advice on how to produce temporary indoor plagues of locusts – and the week next you'll be picking my brain for some other mischief. No, scratch 'mischief' – what you use the magic for is protection and vengeance...as well as a tidy little stipend to keep you out of the salt mines. All three are quite acceptable, no less so than what a man of business or politician uses, what any human uses to get ahead in this society."

"I just don't want any innocents getting hurt, that's all." she replied, rolling the cigarette between her fingers thoughtfully but not smoking it.

"What about YOU getting hurt, Tara? Who will protect you? Who's staying up at night worrying about the hairs on *your* bloody head? Answer: NOBODY! Most are all out for themselves. You've seen this firsthand *how* many times? S'why people like us get into magick in the first place, right? Not for the 'communion with God,' not in tribute to Pallas Athene, not even for the thrills or the knowledge or the wisdom – we did it, way in the beginning, because we felt *powerless*, because we felt our pathetic little selves assailed by vipers on all sides. And in making the necessary sacrifices, in removing ourselves from the warm blanket of respectable society, we earned our powers and became more-than-human; and in so becoming, put ourselves out of the realm and jurisdiction of that same respectable society and the respectable vipers in their clean white gloves and pressed suits who so victimized and shunned us. To *blazes* with them, I say!"

The woman avoided her former mentor's luminescent stare. Perhaps he was correct – maybe Lucy had ulterior motives, if only unconsciously. Dust was a bastard, but it was very true what he said – most of the witches and mages she had met in her life, the really powerful ones, were at the core egotistical and ambitious, and not a few had tried to either hex her or outright kill her. Take Molly Griep, for example. The bitch systemically used black magick to take apart her entire life – and Molly was her best friend! Yes, thought Tara grimly, bitchcraft at its finest, with a kiss from the blade just to be sure.

And yet you let her live.

"I'm not a murderer," Tara replied to the unsaid question. "You have to draw a line someplace or before you know it you're carving a swastika on your forehead with the prison cutlery." She put the cigarette to her lips and quickly lit it, hoping Malcolm would be too wrapped up in his price tags and his self-righteous rants to notice. "She's no longer a threat; just another mortal out there, hating me."

"And without your powers, who pray tell would protect you from these hating mortals?"

"I could just...*live* with it. Live with the Vipers. Like every mortal does."

"And you want to be like 'every mortal,' is that it," Malcolm sneered. "Get married, perhaps? Move into some charming cottage with your ham-headed husband and start a whole brood of y'damn self?"

Tara smiled placidly at Malcolm.

"Based on my observation of aging occultists it seems that even the domestic and banal would be some improvement."

Malcolm grinned tightly back at her, every tooth in his head visible.

"Well. You are a bit of an ungrateful little cunt, you realize this?"

"I don't know, Malcolm," the witch replied, puffing haughtily on her cigarette, "'Ungrateful,' such an abstract and *unmeasurable* word. Unlike the word 'short' or 'doughy.'"

The wide, strained smile remained on Malcolm's face. The man, nonplussed, held up a pair of irons invitingly at her.

"Care to take these for a test drive, Tara? Oh *that's* right – you'll be too busy being good and normal. Well, best of luck with that – *and don't you ever smoke in my goddamn store again!!!*"

*** **

Tara hadn't many regular contacts in the world of unvarnished vanilla humanity – rather, hadn't many that didn't involve transactions, hadn't many that

she visited solely for something approximating friendship. There was Alex, of course. Sweet, cleanhanded Alex, survivor of countless dates from hell and aborted attempts to find his soulmate – the sheer number of such attempts, the fact of his homosexuality aside, uncomfortably convincing her that it meant that they were most certainly not soulmates, no matter how much it felt like they were over the past six years, no matter how steadfast and Samwise the young man was. And the thought had crossed her mind on more than one occasion: was Alex being held back in his quest for romantic fulfillment on account of her? Did his proximity to her and the potent, oft-times chaotic nature of her magicks have anything to do with it? Was Tara hopelessly infecting his life?

That's what she liked about the members of the Invisible College, she thought, as she emerged from the West 4th Street subway station and into the indigo light of dusk. The Invisible College craved *infection*, craved any personal contact they could find with the otherworldly or paranormal, craved to experience more than what their many books and VHS tapes provided them.

She dressed rather conservatively tonight – an old Seventies-style brown leather jacket she had picked up at Cheap Jacks and a pair of jeans – she hoped her lack of gothed out pageantry wouldn't disappoint the College, but she just wasn't up to it today. She was hoping today that she just might...*blend*. Such hopes were momentarily dashed as she passed by the storefront of a pet store and tried to ignore the agitated shrieks and frantic wing-flapping of the gaily-colored parakeets and cockatoos, reminding herself of Lucy's assurance that not everything negative that happens was related to her, reminding herself even as one of the smaller birds smashed its skull against the glass, cracking off its beak in a pink-red smear.

Oh well, Tara thought, thrusting her hands in her pockets and walking just a bit faster towards the neon sign for the pastry shop in the distance. What would Malcolm say about such an unfortunate incident? It was a bloody stupid uptight little bird, right?

The woman weaved awkwardly through the canoodling couples and extended yuppie broods that peopled the narrow sidewalk. How many of those

faces – scrubbed and trimmed and unthreateningly diverse and bohemian like a Gap ad – would ever feel the need to crack open a book of spells? Or consult a shaman for what ails their heart or bedevils their dreams? Or even merely give the idea of a realm beyond the one they knew any thought? What would drive them to do such things? Why would they be driven without that essential detachment from the Hive?

Perhaps there might be one or two souls amongst the hundreds that strolled by who were sorcerers or aliens or remarkable creatures of some sort, only they disguised it well and wore their poker faces comfortable like a second skin. But if that were really the case, Tara would have known, because Otherkin always know their own. And those few times she did pick up an odd glint of an Other's eye, a knowing glance, an aura askew and twinkling – why didn't she acknowledge it, why didn't she ally herself with these kindred spirits and start a club of her own or a coven or clan or something?

Why, indeed?

A rolling, nasal voice greeted the witch as she passed through the glass door of the pastry shop.

"Tara Ammmmmmadeo!"

Armand Giuffre waved his chunky arm at her, and the two fellows that were sitting across from him turned around in their seats and nodded and smiled at her in recognition. The older of the two gentlemen, with thick round spectacles, was Burton Waxman, owner of Waxman Collectables on Bleeker. His frame was small and delicate but densely packed with an energy that never seemed to find an adequate outlet and which manifested itself in the wiry, wayward mass of hair atop his head and under his hawkish nose. His dark eyes loomed large within the heavy prescription off his lenses, and the fliptop sunglasses attachment that rested against his forehead only increased the effect. In contrast, the young man next to him with the fine, close-cropped brown hair and the face from a Norman Rockwell painting, Jeremy Hand, possessed a serene, low-key quality. He was wearing his stiff white karate togs under a hunter-green down jacket; when he wasn't working at his video-rental gig he was studying various martial arts

disciplines in order to prepare him for a battle with demons, grays, vampires, or MIBs (should the situation ever arise), and was quite proficient with the bowstaff.

It was a small College, to be sure, but it was just around the right number to fit in a booth at the Silver Star Cafe, which conveniently enough was always empty but for a couple of ancient Mediterranean types that sat by the door and continuously sipped black steaming liquid from tiny cups. Waterstained photographs of Frank Sinatra, the cast from the Godfather, Tony Montana, and Audrey Hepburn were the only witnesses to the College's arcane and highly confidential meetings, the minutes of which were recorded in the cramped, bubble-like cursive of Burton Waxman on a yellow legal pad. Now that the "special guest star" had arrived and taken her seat next to Giuffre, the official meeting could now begin.

"Have you tried the profffffiterol here," Giuffre asked, motioning to the refrigerated glass display case by the register.

Jeremy frowned and squinted his eyes. "I don't know, looks kind of like a bunch of little balls of poop."

Tara's hazel eyes skimmed the photographic menu until they fell on the profiterol. Indeed, it looked like a cluster of little poop balls.

"I'm going to have the tiramisu," she said, cocking her head to locate the waitress.

"Nah, tiramisu is nothing, like air," Burton said with a sweeping dismissive hand gesture. "What you need to get is a big slice of the black forest cake, you can't go wrong with cake. Tiramisu is for yuppies and bulimics."

Armand rubbed his earlobe thoughtfully.

"Mmmnn, I think I'm going to have the profffffiterol."

*** **

"So...did you guys catch me on CNN?" Tara finally asked after the orders were taken and the coffee served. Though it was true she was disturbed by the whole news thing, it's really nice to have something going about yourself that you

can talk about over tiramisu and profiterol.

Jeremy's normally heavy-lidded eyes widened.

"You were on CNN?"

"Yeah...well...I wasn't *on* CNN, I was *mentioned*. You know, about the Kinky Witter thing."

"Shit, you're involved in that too?" Burton asked, his pupils swimming large and excited within his lenses. "Armie's in it too! Go on, Armie, tell her..."

"Mnnnn," Giuffre began, unfolding his napkin and placing it on his lap. "I was Caril Mmmmmnnnnerrywether's 'P.I.,' as it were, huhhuhuh, right before the *terrible deed*..."

Tara twisted around in her seat until she was facing him directly.

"Are you serious?"

"As serious as Abrahammnn Lincolnnnn's beard. Hired mmme to inquire after her daughter, and what I founnnd was quite revealing to say the least – "

"*Vampires*," Burton interrupted, hardly able to contain himself. "The daughter was the head of like the vampire Yakuza or something, really big-time vamp. What was her name, Armie?"

Giuffre tipped a pink packet of Sweet and Low over the edge of his espresso and flicked it with his thumb and index finger, helping the miniscule crystals of Nutrasweet spill down.

"Mnnn, Rachel. 'Rache' as an abbreviationnnnn."

Tara's jaw dropped and she suddenly doubled over on the chair, her bowels burning.

"Jesus, you're okay?" Burton asked, jerkily extending his arm out and knocking over his cappuccino in the process.

"Profiterol," Tara said weakly, then ran to the bathroom.

*** **

The maintenance worker at the Silver Star Cafe knocked after a time upon the door of the single-occupancy restroom, where Tara had spent the last fifteen

minutes suffering from marathon diarrhea.

“Scuse me, Miss? *Miss?*”

Tara emitted an earsplitting hiss like a rabid swan, the door shaking in its frame.

“S’okay Miss, you take just as long as you need.”

*** **

The witch, several pounds lighter and possibly dehydrated, resumed her seat with the Invisible College and the meeting resumed, a second round of coffee and another helping of profiterol ordered in her absence.

Jeremy made a motion to get up.

“I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,” Tara warned wearily, silently wondering about the deleterious effects of unintentional chaos energy coupled with jet-black fecal material.

“You had us worried, Tara. Mmmmmight it have been something I said, the topic of vammmpires?”

“I got no beef with vampires,” Tara answered after shakily drinking some icewater.

“So you believe in them, then?” Jeremy asked.

“D’oh yeah...they go one way, I go the other.”

“You got any good ‘war stories’ about them?” Burton asked, his pen braced against the coffee-stained legal pad. “Ever kick a vampire’s ass?”

Tara warily eyed the chilled platter of profiterol the waitress placed before Giuffre.

“Once or twice.”

“What would you say is the best fighting technique to defeat a vampire?” Jeremy piped in. He hadn’t ordered any pastries, but had been nursing a tall glass of Coke for the last half-an-hour.

Tara leaned back in her chair and wrung out a wry smile.

“Cut a deal with the devil.”

Burton leaned in towards Tara conspiratorially, tapping his pen rapidly against the table-top to let off some of his surplus energy.

“I’ll bet you’ve got some cool vampire materials and spells in your *personal grimoires*...”

Ah, Burton the Opportunist, thought Tara, completely and utterly shameless. She knew all three of them would have given their right hand (all right, maybe a pinky or a toe or something) to sit down with the Books of Shadows she had kept over the years, spiral notebooks and fancy journals and even stacks of index cards filled with every detail of her life and workings since she was only a wisp of a girl. Only Burton, however, had the *cojones* to bring the subject up at her every guest-appearance at the Invisible College.

“Keep dreaming, Burton.”

“Aw, c’mon, Tara – a *page*. Let us just see a page so we can say we’ve seen an actual witch’s grimoire – you know, from a powerful witch.”

“Thanks for the flattery, but you don’t need to be saying you’ve seen this witch’s anything. You guys are never satisfied.”

“Mnnn, the thirst for knowledge is never satisfied,” Giuffre interjected, motioning with his profiterol-tipped fork.

Tara bunched up her napkin and tossed it on the table.

“Well, group – after countless answers on my part over the years, I finally have a question for you. Are you game? Here goes: what is it like to be normal?”

The three men stared back at Tara with blank Little Orphan Annie eyes.

“You’re asking us?” said Burton, pointing to his own chest.

“C’mon, you know what I mean...you don’t have to deal with all the nutty stuff I have to deal with on a regular basis. You can pack your ‘ghostbusting’ equipment away in your closet and snap the books shut – I wake up from nightmares and find myself on the freakin’ ceiling. Try doing that every day since before puberty and not lust after banality. It’s just too much sometimes, overwhelming...”

“*Heck*, Tara,” Burton said, taking off his glasses and wiping all four lenses

with his shirt, “you’re not that much different than everybody else. Well, actually, *yeah*, you *are* pretty different from most everybody else, sorry. But you’re still human enough. Don’t sweat it. Go out and see a movie every once in a while. Instead of taking a cab or the subway, just walk some blocks and look around you--enjoy life for what it is, the sun, the cool stuff in the shops, babies in strollers. Fresh produce stacked in front of a store window – that’s always made me feel good for some reason. S’no reason to worry. It’s *your* life that’s really cool. Kicking vampires’s asses and stuff.”

And vampires kicking my ass, Tara mused grimly. And me helping vampires kick other vampires’s asses. Rumps solidly whacked rosy all around. Sounds almost erotic, in a sadomasochistic sort of way. Maybe, she thought, I should just sit back and enjoy the ride – on my ASS!

When the 76th meeting of the Invisible College closed for the night and everybody said their goodbyes, Tara headed out towards 6th Avenue and the train station. It was a Friday night, and the restaurants and bars along the way were crammed with revelers, drunken office workers and persons of leisure, celebrating the dawn of the weekend and spilling out onto the sidewalks. And where was Rache Merrywether this fine breezy night in the City, Tara wondered. Who is she feeding on tonight? A cat? Doubtful, especially if she was as powerful as Giuffre was making her out to be. And who would have thought that name from the witch’s past would have wormed its way back into her life in such a cheerfully insane convoluted manner? To quote Margaret Hamilton: “what a world, what a world.”

What did it all mean? Perhaps nothing at all. Or perhaps none of her business.

A few blocks later, Tara saw the apparition.

*** **

Tara insistently shook her roommate’s small hairy Speedo-clad body in his bed.

“AH-lex! Wake up!”

A little bit of drool escaped from his mouth as his tired, puffy eyelids adjusted to the light.

“Taruh? Wha happened?”

“I just saw the Blessed Virgin Mary hovering over the Urban Outfitters on 6th.”

“The...the one next to the surf shop?”

“None other.”

“Are you sure it was her?”

“She was this glowing brunette in a blue dress calling herself Mary. It’s pretty obvious. Shit. What if the Christians were really right?”

“Or just the Catholics?”

“Either or, we’re still fucked. Only, there really wouldn’t be a good reason for *you* to be going to Hell...other than God being an uptight prick with sexual hangups. *Me* on the other hand...doesn’t look good, Alex. *Shit!*”

“Maybe it really wasn’t the Virgin Mary.”

“You’ve heard of Pascal’s Wager, haven’t you? Shit, what if it really *is* her? Well _ no more butt sex for you.”

“I haven’t had butt sex in eight months. Sigh.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok. Maybe I’ll just save myself for marriage.”

*** **

Tara had seen many apparitions over the years – as well as not a few out-and-out materializations that were all hard and moist and stuff – so she knew that logically (as far as logic went within the realms she travelled) the Mary image she saw floating over Urban Outfitters on 6th could have been many things. Could have been a phantom from back when she was a little kid and attending religious instruction classes in preparation for Holy Communion. Could have been a literal or mental projection created by an extra-dimensional/extra-terrestrial being of

some kind, what UFO researcher Jacques Vallee referred to as “BVM” (Blessed Virgin Mary) sightings. Could have been a demon or some other bugaboo attempting to trick or confuse her. Or – and this was a very valid “or,” at least as much as the others were – it could have been the actual mother of Christ. It was this last possibility that scared Tara half to death.

Oh, she supposed it shouldn’t have scared her, per se. Seen in another light, it might have been cause for some sort of celebration. Maybe it was God giving her the tidy little answer she needed to quell her existential woes once and for all. Maybe it was a “sign” with a capital S, exquisitely rendered in illuminated manuscript. And as for guilt? She merely needed to confess her sins.

And so Tara found herself in the tiny velvet-lined confines of the confessional at Our Lady Of The Immaculate Womb Church, located on a side-street right off of a particularly well-stocked Old Navy outlet. Every step Tara took into the church made her feel accused, like a slinking dirty interloper tracking mud upon the carpet of the Lord. A life-sized wooden statue of the crucified Jesus greeted the parishoners as they first walked in, every detail lovingly and vividly carved into the antique piece as if by Pygmalion himself: the hearty streams of blood that bubbled up from Jesus’s nailed palms, pouring down His arms in thick ropy strands; the gaping wound on His side, deep and revealing the tissue underneath, the cascade of blood issuing forth from the fissure so realistic that one instinctively looked down to the marble floor to follow the trail of gore, stepping back a few paces so it wouldn’t splatter on one’s shoes; and the gaunt face of the Savior, every tendon in his neck and cheeks sticking straight out in sheer animal agony, eyes partially rolled back white in his head, blood showering down from the thorns pressed into his skull, mouth fixed in an indescribably grotesque shape of horror and suffering. A sign on a metal stand beside the figure advertised the church’s free marriage counseling services and after-school programs.

I guess this is it, Tara thought as the partition that sealed off the little metal grating between her section of the confessional and the priest’s lifted with a shuffle.

“Speak, my child,” said the elderly voice on the other side of the grate.
“Why have you come here today?”

“D’um...it’s been 17 years since my last confession. And I’m here to confess.”

“And what have you to confess before your Lord and Savior?”

“Well...I know this is going to sound, uhm, kinda ‘off the wall,’ but I’ve been, you know, practicing witchcraft a little bit.”

“Oh, *my*. This is quite serious. How long has this been going on?”

“I’d say about 17 years or so. At least.”

“My! Do you take any drugs?”

“No, I’m clean. Some alcohol, no drugs. I can’t do drugs anyway, they make me go bat-sh – I mean, they mess me up.”

“Have you ever been a member of a coven?”

“Coven? No, not really. I mean, I tried to get into that stuff when I was younger, but--you know all the egos involved in a group, the competition, ‘I’ve invoked Marduk before you did ha-ha,’ etc. But I have practiced with, you know, a girl from school for a while.”

“I see. So you and this girl from school – you practiced witchcraft *together*?”

“Yeah, you know, we called the corners, did a few spells...mostly watched rented videos and kicked back a few cartons of Bartles and Jaymes.”

“What would...you and this girl *do* when you practiced witchcraft?”

“What we did? Just lit some candles, maybe put out a few bowls of herbs, then chanted some, and – “

“Was there *homosexual activity* involved?”

“Uh...no, not really. I mean, I think there was a slight subtext going on during the whole thing, but nothing overt, certainly not anything sexual.”

“So you never engaged in any lesbianism during the course of your witchcraft? Never performed spells in the *nude*, for instance?”

“Skyclad? No, I never felt the need – “

“Ever do spells in your underwear?”

“What – hey, are you breathing heavy?!”

*** **

When Tara arrived back at her shitty rental in Williamsburg, Alex was curled up on the couch eating cheddar cubes from a bag, watching a Heckle and Jeckle cartoon with serenity. she collapsed beside him in a slack-lidded, dejected lump.

“I gave a priest crabs in the house of the Lord.”

Alex stopped in mid-chew and looked at her, noticing the gauze bandage taped to her forehead with the quarter-sized red disc of blood at its center.

“Did he upset you?”

“He was jerking off to my confessions.”

“Wow...that’s totally not cool.”

“Do you think I’ll get a special dispensation from God regarding this?”

“I wouldn’t know...I’m not especially knowledgeable about these things.”

Alex motioned to his forehead. “How did you get the...”

“This big crucifix fell on me on the way out.”

“It just *fell* on you?”

“It clobbered me.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“You should see the other guy.”

Out of the corner of her eye Tara could see a thin, black figure fidgeting with one of her crystal skulls.

“AH-lex,” Tara said, snatching the bag of cheese away from her roommate.

“Yes?”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Uh, that’s Myra Banes.”

*** **

The young woman was dressed on her widow's weeds: a long, formless black satin dress that faithfully reproduced her pencil-like form; two small, soft bumps pressing gently against the elaborate mess of lace, ruffles, and buttons on her chest. Isis mourning her damn prick bastard Osiris, wiling away the hours in Flatbush by writing bitter poetry and sprawling her lanky frame face-first upon the black-and-red Celtic tapestry of a dragon that was spread over her bed, weeping piteously as the gods of Goth stared down on her expressionless with their unfeeling kohl-rimmed eyes –

"I was just hoping that you would be able to *help* me – for the right fee, of course," Myra said sweetly, fingering the silver coffin pendant that hung between her pronounced collarbones.

Tara remained seated on the couch, munching on the hijacked cheese cubes, Alex at her side. The television was still on, though the volume was turned down; images of Mr. Magoo blissfully treading on a tiger's tail flickering on the glass.

"Let me get this straight. You were fucking a married man. Now he doesn't want to see you again – "

"We don't know that for sure!" the gothic girl interrupted, extending a pale, reedy finger.

"Ok, he hasn't contacted you any more. So you just wrote him a letter expressing your undying love in the hopes that he will realize that you are his soulmate and that he should leave his wife post haste – but just in case you words fail to turn his heart, I'm supposed to do a fail safe. A spell. This is what you want?"

"Oh, yes." Myra said, nodding her long, angular head. "I heard about you from CNN. And frankly, simply the idea of consulting a real witch is rather exciting for me. These are the circles I have always wanted to travel, the – where am I?"

"I think you have the wrong apartment," said Tara, nonplussed by the

young woman's sudden disorientation.

"I-I think I do...nice deco, though."

"Thanks."

"Well...sorry."

Tara flashed her a toothy grin and waved goodbye with a crisp flick of her hand.

"I just helped her out, that's all," the witch said as the door shut, answering Alex's wordless question. "Removed the object of her heartbreak – made her forget all about the two-timer."

"How did you do that?" Alex asked, sneaking his hand back into the bag of cheese.

"Amnesia. Blessed Lethe."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"On the contrary, I'm quite familiar with it."

"Is it permanent?"

"The way I do it is – just as permanent as some nutjob blasting the roof of some schmuck's skull, but a bit less *messy*."

Tara lay back on the couch, as cozy as a cat, resting her head in Alex's lap, relaxed, satisfied.

"*Yep*," she continued, "after doing it wrong for all these years, I finally did something right. And selflessly sacrificed some dough in the process, I might add."

"Are you going to be doing that a lot in the future?"

"What, giving them amnesia?"

"Turning down payment."

*** **

The two fell asleep in front of the television set, the cartoons having long since given way to reruns of second-rate sitcoms, the local news, the Honeymooners, and now the Late Late movie, a grainy copy of Tourist Trap.

Alex woke up with his right leg asleep, Tara's head effectively cutting off his circulation. He poked at his thigh analytically, noting how it felt like it was made of dense, pillow-like material.

"Tara?"

"Hurm..."

"Tara, I forgot to tell you – Roy called. He wants to meet you at Starbucks. Something about the Eight."

"The Nine," Tara corrected in a soft, weak voice. Then she winced and slapped her forehead. "*Fuck!*"

Pull back the view far past the shitty rental in Williamsburg, pan out until you get a shot of the entire landscape of Brooklyn, the borough that encompassed Lucy's Hedgewich, Myra's gothic enclave, and Tara's Temple. And then pull back farther, up in the air, where all the tops of buildings and antennas and church steeples poke out at you like thousands of fingers. Now zoom back dead straight into the moist cavern of Tara's mouth, the curve of her uvula--

"FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!"

*** **

It might be noted of Roy as he materialized from his meeting with the Council of Nine that he was like zombie, so heavily burdened he was by the information given to him – but that would be unnecessarily cruel, because he was a zombie. Perhaps not in the sense of a George Romero movie or a goateed Bela Lugosi's mindless thrall, but the body he inhabited was most certainly not alive, and a faint odor of decomposition trailed in his wake, a tangy rich smell of soil and rot. However, he was much luckier in terms of bodily condition than a lot of the No Men in that his death as a human was relatively clean – some of his less fortunate brethren were sans limbs, arms, lips, or possessing a face that looked like it was run over by a SUV (precisely because it was run over by a SUV). Skin that was gray and gray and sloughing lazily off bones –

The Undead was well over six feet tall and a physically imposing presence that needed no black cape, no spiked boots or gauntlet, no clawed hands or pointed teeth to herald his origins to the public; been there, done that, and the thick magickal frost that clung to his being cleared his path and always got him a seat on the subway. He wore a long dusty leather trenchcoat that was tightly fastened shut by a belt and long series of metal clasps; the brim of the driving cap he wore was pulled in tight above his wraparound mirror-lensed sunglasses. The musty easy chair at Starbucks, upholstered with the images of the great writers of our time, was low and soft and Roy found himself sinking in the cushion, his long legs nearly folding over in two in an attempt to accommodate himself to it. Tara sat in a wooden chair with one leg shorter than the others and this provided her the leeway to rock back and forth on it impatiently like an eight-year-old. In front of her was a tall plastic container filled with iced coffee and spiked with a straw that was even taller.

“No coffee, Roy? Some herbal tea perhaps?”

“You know I don’t drink,” he answered in a low, otherworldly baritone.

“Just trying to make it easy for you, Roy-Boy,” the witch said. She leaned over the table and said in a low voice, “I heard if you don’t order anything here, it don’t matter if you’re a friend of a patron or no, they throw you out on your ass. And if you bring you own beverage, they take you to the back and shove your face in the coffee beans until you suffocate. Then they chop up your body to make those little sandwiches.”

She leaned back, wobbled a couple of times.

“Are you finished?” Roy asked.

“No, No, I’m not. I haven’t told you about their secret Frappucino recipe.”

“I do not care to know it.”

“Okay, fine. Your loss. It’s *tasty*.”

He tried to maintain his grim and businesslike stance in the wake of the idiotic chair he was sitting in. He folded his big brown hands on the table.

“As you know, I have recently been in a meeting with the Council of Nine. They are concerned about an anomaly in the normal webs of karmic energy that

interlace your present reality. Specifically, your interaction with the *Merrywether* woman.”

“You’re talking about Rache?’ Tara asked indignantly, swishing her straw around the chunks of ice in her drink. “She’s just a punk--just another stupid vampire. Hardly a matter of cosmic importance.”

“Only the Nine fully understand such matters – I am merely relating them back to you now. Several years ago you presented her with an occult item of great power, did you not?”

“Ha! I instructed her how to build a skanky smelly wad of useless shit – it was a joke!”

“And you bled all over it?”

Tara choked on her coffee in disbelief. “Well, shit – *not intentionally!* And how the fuck do those guys know this shit? And if they’ve got the power to know all, see all – why can’t they just go out and settle this shit on their own?”

“Only the Nine fully understand such matters. But what is clear is that by facilitating the construction of said talisman you gravely interrupted the natural karmic flow, giving the Merrywether woman the power and confidence to cut a deep swath of destruction in her wake. In addition, the only person who was in a position to end Merrywether’s reign of death and karmic distortion before it even begun to infect the landscape--besides you of course – unfortunately had his testicles smashed in before he could even get to her. And who performed such an act upon that vampire slayer?”

“Divine Brown?”

“To every action there is a reaction, Amadeo – and only the Nine knows the trajectories each strand of cause and effect and cause will take. Apparently, this particular strand that you set off is quite problematic.”

“Well, what the hell am I supposed to do about it?”

“*Kill her.*”

Tara pushed her chair back and away from the table with her left foot, the shorter leg, its roughhewn metal tip exposed, screeching against the surface of the floor.

“Hahaha. Sure. And when would does the Nine expect me to do that?”

“As soon as possible, preferably after our conversation.”

“I have an idea--why don't *you* kill Rache? I know you got all that artillery under your coat.”

“For the infested karmic strand to be broken, only you can do it.”

“But I don't *want* to do it! Look Roy, I know she's a miserable, murdering scumbag, okay? But so are a lot of people. Sure, I've got some 'powers' – such as they are – but that don't mean I have the authority to go out killing bad people.”

“The Nine gives you the authority.”

“Who...who the fuck are the Nine anyway? *God?*”

“Only the Nine fully under–“

“Yeah, yeah, I know! Sigh...Don't matter anyway. I'm not killing Rache Merrywether.”

“You will have to do it sooner or later – the more you wait, the greater the karmic anomaly –“

“Are you deaf as well as dead? Forget it!”

Roy leaned sharply towards the woman in agitation, a red glow escaping from the edges of his sunglasses like wisps of smoke.

“It is imperative that you destroy the vampire as soon as possible!”

“And what if I don't?”

The hulking, cold shape in the coat and mirrored glasses shuddered for a second at Tara's question, one that he hadn't anticipated though he knew in retrospect he should have. The question – wasn't it the most basic question of all? Wasn't the answer the most fundamental reason why he was there in New York City sitting in a yuppie coffee bar in the first place? And wouldn't the Answer, though harsh, if properly applied prevent its very outcome?

So Roy began to speak, and as soon as he did so, an abandoned porcelain coffee cup from a neighboring table flew into the air and hit him right in the mouth

*** **

He *tried* to tell her. He tried to tell her, but at every attempt something would appear to plug up his fount of truth. He tried to tell her about the No Men's mission, but a family of voles would crawl out of his mouth, trotting onto the table as dainty as you please only to dematerialize. He tried to tell her about his concerns, about why he was stationed in this area, why he was assigned to her, but his lips would grow into each other like the two sides of a clotting wound. He tried to explain why it was of such paramount importance that she kill Rache Merrywether in a timely fashion but his lower jaw fell off, only to reappear; his tongue detached and squirmed out of his mouth and onto the table like a miniature Jabba the Hutt; he vomited S-shaped packing peanuts. And Tara's reaction? It was all like a cartoon, she saw Roy as the rubbery hero of a Saturday Morning kid's show who also happened to regenerate his body parts at will and had no dermis or requisite layer of fat with which to cover his ribcage.

Finally Roy relented, surrendering to the wishes of his bosses or whomever so strongly wished that he not speak of his secrets. And he knew that to make such unauthorized revelations was to himself undermine the integrity of the karmic web and add further anomalies. It felt odd for him to experience these conflicting feelings, of guilt and disobedience – but such was the price to pay for being tied to the meat.

Also, the coffee barista asked them to leave because they were upsetting the other customers.

*** **

The two emerged from the Starbucks out into the acute midday sunlight, into a world of relentlessly marching office drones in their suits and overcoats, burly men in corporate logo'd t-shirts and soot-smeared jeans unloading vast pallets of office supplies and computer equipment encased in plastic wrap, and

the occasional tourist, or aimless wanderer, or undefined personality working on his or her way silent and thoughtful through the crowd, observing the Machine with inscrutable eyes and perhaps even silently spitting on the whole thing. And then there was the witch and the zombie staring each other down in front of the Starbucks on Upper Broadway, the witch adamant.

“Tell the Nine that I’m not killing her and that’s my final offer.”

“They already know,” Roy said grimly.

“Did they know that even before we met up today?”

“Only the Nine fully understands such matters.”

“I’ll *bet* they did. Working for such omnipotent ball-busters can be quite the time-waster, no?”

“As to that I am without opinion. However, I will advise you one more time – destroy the vampire.”

“Vampires gotta live too, Roy.”

Tara gazed at her reflection doubled in the dark man’s sunglasses; then looked to her right at the exterior of the Starbucks, at another reflection of her in the pane, this one somewhat warped and transparent, incorporating the reflection of the glass storefront across the street that boasted still another fleeting, near-unrecognizable image of the woman. Then Roy dematerialized, his form taking on the appearance of his surroundings chameleon-like, warping like paper, blinking out of sight. And Tara felt out-of-place and purposeless there, and perhaps a little bit foolish, as if someone caught her stumbling as she walked, and she disappeared into the nearest subway station.

*** **

Tara Amadeo, sophomore at Kennedy University, carefully spread her green hooded windbreaker out on the verdant lawn; it had rained only the day before, and the ground was still moist and fragrant with the scent of soil and freshly-cut grass. The campus was absolutely glorious in the springtime – an eden of lush flora and carefully planned horticulture, stalwart rows of majestic

trees lining the the pathways of cobblestones and concrete. And in the embrasures created by the herbage hid tidy patrician institutions of learning, buildings of ivy-laced brick, Grecian columns, and art deco. It was a place where the young woman could spread her books on philosophy and art and religion and literature out in front of her and spend countless hours reading and finding herself beneath the canopy of leaves extended by the lithe, cantilevered branches above. She wore her long, limp brown hair back in a thick plastic headband, and a rather large pair of rose-tinted glasses treated with Scratchguard covered much of the top of her face. An elongated beige sweater reached almost a foot below her waist, from where a beige-and-white silk skirt emerged and terminated at her ankles. Around her neck was a simple black cord with an ankh of carved bone hanging from it, a recent present from Molly Griep, who seemed to enjoy doting on the tall, awkward woman (much more now that Molly had undergone the Change).

A couple of years ago, when the two first met, Molly had appeared not at all that much different in appearance than Tara (though the demeanor of the shorter girl always maintained an assertiveness and dominant feature that the other girl lacked.). But gradually Molly began to make the Change, trading her round, wire-rimmed granny glasses for purple prescription sunglasses, unbinding her copious blond hair from its trademark Rapunzel-length braid and letting it spill down her body in Botticelli waves. Gone were the bulky T-shirts that proudly announced her favorite science-fiction movies and hid half her bosom, and in its place were more revealing fare – what only a short time before Molly herself referred to in derision as “hoochie rags.” The whole sea-change in Molly Griep would have had the harmless, playful caste of Olivia Newton-John in the “You’re the One That I want” sequence of Grease – but for the fact that Molly Griep was a witch.

A *witch*, Tara thought in wonder as she spread her book on the art of Georgia O’Keefe out in front of her. It was all quite weird and fascinating. Molly had been teaching her some rudimentary concepts of magic – or rather, magick, as the short blond liked to point out to her professors and fellow students, “Doug

Henning is magic, the circus is magic – witches, real witches, practice *magick*.” But Tara just didn’t seem to be very good at the occult arts – her attention-span was too small to do all that meditating and creative visualization, and she could never quite remember which aspects belonged to which elements belonged to which directions on the compass. Molly, however, steadfastly would not give up on the girl, and frankly the attention flattered the brunette enough to keep indulging her.

And might Molly’s Change been brought about by the magick? Oh, Tara thought it quite impolite to inquire about the possibility – she didn’t want to infer that the girl wasn’t capable of coming up with those improvements on her own. But the quality of the magick Molly practiced itself had changed; taken a dark cast. The woman began to talk of sigils activated by blood, the invocation of Goetic demons, and the opening of gates. Such talk should have frightened Tara, but strangely it didn’t. It was all quite weird and fascinating.

Molly had also taken a shine to the idea of becoming a vampire, or at least dating one. Of all the elements of her friend’s personal mythology, Tara found this the hardest to believe in. Perhaps with enough study and practice, Molly could indeed become the powerful sorceress she wanted to be and believed she almost was. But vampires were purely a Slavic fairy-tale created to explain strange but scientifically explainable anomalies in corpse decomposition. Molly, however, was completely undeterred by the lack of solid evidence on the subject, and began to neglect her chosen academic concentration – Medieval History, most specifically the legends of the Holy Grail – in order to tirelessly research and accumulate data on every aspect of the vampire mythos. She had also developed an obsession with the horror movie character The Sweet Hereafter, who looked in no small part like a vampire himself (though he was really this guy who, like, died in the crossfire of a botched convenience store robbery and then was, like, brought back from the dead by strange mystical forces to avenge himself and fight evil everywhere). Soon, even Molly’s amorous designs on this Trent Reznor-looking dude in her Library Science class was ignored in favor for the Eternal Beloved that peopled her dreams and waking reveries.

Tara's friend had even spoke of creating a *tulpa* based on the likeness of Rob Sullivan – a thoughtform to have and to hold. Perhaps that's the only reason she even befriended Tara, because that and other works were better accomplished with two minds to focus energy upon the target in question instead of one. The bespectacled brunette couldn't see what other reason Molly would have to hang out with her--she was boring, quiet, awkward, and utterly unappealing. But maybe she was being too hard on herself, and on humanity to boot – maybe what Molly offered was simple, compassionate friendship, a bond between two sisters that extended far beyond the superficial and cut down deep to the heart, to the spirit. Yes, the tall woman said to herself with a smile as she looked on in admiration at the reds and blacks of a full-page reproduction of O'Keefe's "Large Dark Red Leaves On White" – her and Molly were *Sisters of the Spirit*. And there was a good reason why they were together, a Higher Reason. And it felt so good to belong to a Higher Reason rather than just be a nobody.

Tara spied her friend striding confidently down the winding path between the trees. The blond wore a funky black pantsuit with a white satin blouse that poured diaphanously out of the jacket's cuffs in luxurious, bell-like ruffles. An upside-down pentacle was tied fast to her neck with a black cord, and she also wore a long silver necklace with a large silver ankh on it, far larger than the one she gave Tara. Slung on her shoulder was a fringed black leather sack filled with books and hanging from the fingertips of her left hand was a purple gift-bag made out of prismatic material.

"Hello, Birthday Girl," Molly purred, teasingly shaking the purple bag and motioning to sit beside her.

"Oh, watch it," Tara exclaimed, reaching her hand out uselessly, "the dirt is still wet!"

Molly looked down at the grass with a frown, almost as if the leaves and the soil had done something purposely to piss her off.

"Let's not stay here too long anyway," she snapped, "it's too hot, and all these annoying people—" Then her face softened again, thick blond eyebrows arching up in excitement: "We can go back to *my* house...I've got the 'Sweet

Hereafter' out from Blockbuster again, and maybe we could work on the *tulpa*! I've been concentrating really hard on him – and it's almost like I can see his outline...I'm sure together we could – “

“Oh, I'm sorry, Molly – my mom is taking me out to dinner today for my birthday...”

“I thought you *hated* your mother,” the blond woman said with annoyance.

“I don't...*hate* her. It's just when she criticizes me I get kind of...”

“You should so totally move out of there – your Mom's totally evil, you know. She's like, casting evil, negative thoughts on you. That's what's holding you back from the magick.”

“She's just an alcoholic, Molly.”

“That's just the Forces disguising all that negativity in something so-called 'harmless' and using it to hold you back.”

“I know, but...she's buying me *dinner*.”

Molly curled her thin scarlet lips in a smirk.

“*Whore*,” she said playfully.

*** **

Dinner with Mom at the Oyster Palace was ok – the waiters even marched out of the kitchen with violins and maracas to sing “Happy Birthday,” fireworks and pinwheels on a chocolate cake. But whenever Tara was in the presence of her mother she felt insignificant, nonexistent. It wasn't anything the woman said, per se – well, actually there were a few things she said – but it was just in her bearing, her accent on the jumble of aesthetic rules and codes for conduct conducive to getting a good fuck or a rich man that tumbled out of the pages of Cosmo like jacks. When was she was getting married, Mom wanted to know. Was she seeing any guys? Was she *interested* in any guys?

Tara unhooked her skirt and let it fall to her stockinged ankles. *Everything looks slim and flawless and perfect in nylons*, she thought. Was she interested in any guys? Maybe if she could find one like her, could find one that shared that

yearning cavernous something, that ache for Something More – no, she couldn't exactly define it, what the quality was that she sought, because she couldn't exactly define herself. She only could define herself at this point by what she didn't want, what she was not – Tara Amadeo was most certainly not nor aspired to be a shiny happy Maybelline-spattered member of the Hive. No, certainly not...but couldn't she perhaps have her cake and eat it too? Like Molly? Sure, Molly was pretty now – but she also held on to her own personal mythology. It would be nice to do that, to have it all – looks, integrity, success. The woman peeled off her glasses and removed her headband, letting the front part of her long brown hair drop down and frame her face.

How often Tara dreamed of it, of life after college, in the Real World. To build a life of her own, and fill it with weird and fascinating things, things that would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was something more than the pale gray reality she lived in outside her borrowed books. There was an emptiness in Tara, an undefined quality devoid of color, passion, and, most importantly, personal mythology; she was strangely devoid of meaningful memories, and it was only in the last two years at the University that she was able to even start building, piece after slim piece, an identity of her own. But that burgeoning identity had none of the conviction or texture of Molly Griep's, but rather was disconnected tiny patchwork thrown on a blank movie screen. Tara surveyed the objects on her dresser, that very same dresser she had as a child and young adult: a comb, a round brush, a hairdryer, an old sample bottle of perfume she had been taking quick, imperceptible droplets from for years, a Tupperware full of Q-tips, a little grey pompom ball with googly eyes, simple feet, and a banner running from it advertising an insurance company. No photos. No "flair." The woman was a cypher; she resolved to buy some postcards from the campus bookshop the very next day and put them up on her walls with that removable tape stuff that didn't leave a mess. She took off her pantyhose, sweater, and bra and let them drop on top of her skirt, then stooped to pick the whole pile of clothing up – and in so doing, her vision fell directly on the purple gift-bag sitting on the floor against the wall.

Tara remembered opening up her gifts in front of Molly out there on the Quad, feigning excitement but inwardly baffled by the odd wooden plaque painted in black and red and inscribed with various runes, sigils, and a pentagram. Apparently her friend had made it herself as well as consecrated it and charged it with magickal energy. Together with the black patchouli votive candle that was also in the bag, Molly encouraged her to use the two in a spell, an “awesome super-magickal spell” that could grant her (in time and in due measure) anything she wanted. And what did Tara want? Boys? Success? Beauty? Power? How about a healthy balance of all four – wasn’t that what every woman was entitled to? And yes, perhaps an Identity of her very own – but though the brunette was gentle, naive, and somewhat prone to daydreaming, she knew enough about the limits of reality to realize that such a thing wasn’t sprung up whole like Athena from her father’s skull, but rather was the result of years accumulated. And so Tara had no specific goal in mind when she took the wooden “power object” and the candle out of the bag and set them up on her floor.

The woman pulled on her long white nightgown and proceeded to get a book of matches from the kitchen. The door to her mother’s room was cracked open an inch and she could see her in bed watching television and sipping wine in the dark. She must have heard her.

“D’yave a good birthday, honey?” she asked, turning her head away from the flickering 36-inch screen to address the sliver of Tara’s form that was visible.

“I had a great birthday, Mom. Thanks a lot for everything.”

“Did you try on that new dress I bought you?”

“Not yet, but I’m going to.”

“Try it on, honey – if it doesn’t fit you can take it back to the store.”

“Ok, I will...”

“Did you see the receipt I put with the dress? You didn’t throw it out with the tissue paper, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You should save the receipt because if it doesn’t fit you can take it back

for an exchange. You can't do the exchange without the receipt."

"Ok, thanks, Mom..."

"And you have to leave the tags on, too. D'you understand? They won't take it back if they think you've used it already."

"Ok..."

"I got you a size a little bigger, because I think you've put on a little *weight* lately..."

"Mom..."

"Y'gotta stay away from those Dunkin' Donuts – that's how you get fat!"

"GoodnightMomloveyou," Tara said rapidly, pulling the glass knob gently until the door to her mother's room was soundlessly closed.

She returned to her own room with the matches and regarded the black candle with a frown. The wick was too long. She was afraid that if the wick was too long, the fire would be too big and loose and maybe spark and cause an accident. In some matters, Tara was very cautious – so she looked for a pair of scissors, and when she couldn't find the scissors she remembered that old dusty box of razors she discovered recently at the back of one of her drawers. And as she tried to whittle away the wick of the black patchoulli-scented candle, the blade slipped and stuck her full in the middle finger of her left hand.

It took her a second or so to register what had just happened, long enough for the neurons to fire around the inch-long wound and soon her right hand grabbed her left wrist and she stared in horror at the partially-submerged blade and the slow, terrible flow of the dark red blood that seeped down towards her palm.

"Ah! Ah! Oh, *God*..."

How could this have happened so fast – one minute nothing, now this, the pressing question facing her, the Question, the question as to whether to take the blade out, would it be worse if the blade was pulled out, but of course the blade had to be taken out–

Maybe Mother would know what to do??? *No*, Tara said to herself, *I can do this, I'm an adult and I can do this* and she bit her lower lip and pulled the

blade out, and the blood flowed as bountiful and wet as water and spilled hot out of her finger down her arm and onto the strange wooden object on the floor, and it hurt, it hurt pulling that blade out and she took quick, hard breaths and didn't know how she was going to close that wound up, she didn't know and she bunched up the edge of her nightgown around her left hand and the thin cotton soon puffed thick with red, the richest red you could ever imagine, the luxurious carmine of a king's robe. And she looked at the blood puddled up on the surface of that flat wooden object, the claret obscuring and falling into the grooves of the carved symbols, and it was like an elevator dropped ten stories in her chest. The room took on a palpable sense of the invaded, the insane, the immediate and the sharp-in-focus and a terrible pain gripped her brain, an unrelenting pressure against the meat of her eyes and it was so agonizing and sprung on her so suddenly that she jumped up and mindlessly flailed across the room, choking back screams but breathing in audible gusts, looking at walls and furniture and her closed door and her drawer and finding no answer, no way to stop it, to stop it—

Tara grabbed the large old hardcover Webster's Dictionary that was sitting studiously on a chair and smashed herself on the head with it, splitting her forehead open and setting her dead straight crashing into the floor.

Everything was quiet. Though she had managed to hold on to her consciousness she was very calm. The pain in her skull had stopped. Her finger still hurt but the sting felt distant. The woman lay on her stomach, her head turned to the left, a smear of blood across her forehead. Somewhere outside the house somebody was playing Led Zeppelin's "Dancing Days" and it perfectly made sense, to play music with the windows open on such a temperate Spring night. And then the sensation in her brain bubbled back, this time not as a headache but almost like a thing moving around in there, an organic, sentient mass, and Tara began to breathe heavy again, became aware of the sensation of her left hand lying in a puddle of blood, and the mass in her brain began to throb, began to burrow and shudder and travel, and the mass sunk to the base of her skull and pushed up, pushed up against her neck, and a slick black tendril

pushed its way out of her skin, wagging like a dog's tail, and she pressed her face into her floor and emitted a loud, straining groan as she took her uninjured hand and grabbed the thin strip of alien flesh that stuck out of the back of her neck and pulled, and the throat-raw screaming as the animal was pulled out and flung against the wall –

The brunette flipped into a startled sitting position and from there jumped to her feet. At the far side of the room sliding down the wall was a blackish-green glutinous smear, and on the ground a scorpion-like black creature with skin as smooth and glistening as an otter's pulsed. Tara mechanically, silently picked her dictionary off the floor and flung it on the creature – it shuddered sickeningly under the sizable tome, an oil-like liquid oozing from its crushed body, and then stopped completely, dead. And Tara was so aware of the emptiness at the back of her neck, of yet another wound open, this one presumably the size of a baseball, and she didn't think she was going to live through it, but she was still standing under the harsh overhead light, and "Dancing Days" was still playing outside, and the book and the creature and the room began to fade and bend like diffused light and superimposed upon it were white blocks of marble, a flight of steps leading up past the ceiling, and it all came back to her in a terrible, wonderful gush, all 21 years and beyond, and both of her hands reached to the back of her neck and held on tight to the flaps of her wound and tore the flesh right off her head, pulled the skin off easy like stockings and revealed an unblemished double of herself underneath wearing the same white nightgown, tore the skin off and cast it away to the bottom of what remained of the floor as the two realities changed places in the square-dance.

She set her bare feet upon the cold smooth surface of the first stair and began the journey, up past crowds of elaborately-dressed beautiful creatures, male and female, humanoid and darkling other, who stood by the railings, who sipped drinks from exotic fluted glasses and played indistinct instruments or just made deliberate, elegant movements with their arms, and they all applauded as she got higher and higher on the stairs, and way below back in her room the sounds of "Dancing Days" drifted up like Jack's beanstalk, and she turned her

eyes away from that realm for what she decided would be the last time and instead looked up, looked up to the grand marble building, gilt in gold, that waited at the top.

And amongst the crowds she passed she saw Molly sit leisurely on a step, leaning voluptuously upon The Sweet Hereafter's naked, alabaster skin, the two of them waving at her friendly as she proceeded up, and it all came back to Tara, all 21 years that the Council tried to keep from her, and somewhere far below in the place she decided to never visit again was the queer wooden object coated with her blood.

I saw a lion he was standing alone with a tadpole in a jar...

"Welcome back, child," intoned a masculine voice from above, a voice that was both godlike and disarmingly familiar. Tara ascended faster up the staircase, hungry to get even a glimpse of what waited for her on the top, and when she got there she saw an assemblage of more beautiful creatures, creatures garbed in gowns and suits that were at once classically formal and inarticulately alien, creatures of shattering beauty and eyes that shone like glass, and in the center of the party that greeted her was a tall, muscular man dressed in a gray collarless suit that was as loose and free as fine linen hanging from a clothesline, a creature with wavy red hair that rested Samson-like about the tops of his shoulders, a creature with golden eyes detailed in red that shone from within, and though Tara knew he was a powerful being of some kind she was amazed at how amicable and delicate his features were. He stretched his hands out to her.

"My child, it is so *good* to have you home."

It's so good to be home, Tara thought.

"You have spent so much time running away from me, from us," he continued, "and those years were so needlessly sad and wasted. But now we have brought you home. It was difficult to reach you – and if it wasn't for your friend we might never have had reached you. You owe her a great deal of gratitude."

Yes...

"But now here you are, and here I am, and here we are. And now time

must move forward once again, and the sleep has passed, and the false kingdom almost overcome.”

A golden chalice suddenly appeared in his hands.

“We take care of our own, here,” he said, holding the cup up to her lips.

And then the beautiful creature’s clothes whipped and fluttered upon his body as if a great wind disturbed them, and the jacket and the shirt were gone, and his broad, well-defined chest was exposed and soon right next to Tara’s face, and she was completely activated and knew what to do, and she opened up her mouth and bit into his flesh, and his strong fingers laced through the long brown locks of her hair as she drank, drank to the point of hurting him—

“Feed, my child. The time of starvation is over.”

LESSONS FOR THE NOVICE

Mia Cefalu looked upon it as her "lost year"— a period of time in which she only *partially* existed. The malaise in her marriage to Frank, her descent into the numbness that was life on prescription tranquilizers, the discovery of her husband's affair, and, most significantly, the Catalyst, that final drop into the glass of water that sends its contents spilling – her attack by the vampire. Yes, being attacked by a vampire will do strange things to you, if it doesn't kill you. And strange days had certainly come upon Mia, in the weeks and months after the incident – but she had a handle on it, now. And much like an adolescent in an African tribe who is held down on the bed of leaves while the ritual scarring of his body is performed, it is only a relatively short period of pain and hurt, and a whole lifetime left to enjoy the newfound status. The suffering and bewilderment rolls back into the ocean, and what remains is the cellophane-wrapped gift at the bottom of the cereal box. And now that the beach was laid bare and the gifts harvested, it was time to *live*.

And so Mia did what every other woman in the charming pre-planned Long Island hamlet of Shore's End did when celebrating such a pivotal life's passage – she got a \$600 makeover at La Belle Dame Spa et Salon, right around the corner from the Ben & Jerry's cottage.

She was aromatherapied, massaged, exfoliated, scrubbed, waxed, painted, cut, frosted, and plucked, and when it was over her long brown hair rested upon her shoulders and forehead in well-sculpted tresses kissed with gold, her skin a little pink and moist from the skin treatments but flawless and as soft as butter. She dug in her beige plaid Coach wallet for her credit card and convivially handed the gray plastic to the bronzed and bleached platter at the other side of the counter, who ran it through a machine until it pinged in recognition. Mia had tipped generously. Tomorrow she would shop for a whole new wardrobe. The day after she would start looking for a job. It was all a very

logical progression, the trajectory of which was leading inexorably to the first day of the rest of her life.

The sun was out and over the shopping islands, over the petite mimosas and Japanese red maples that were planted neatly outside the stores, over the polluted yellowing grass and sparse shrubs lining the shoulder across the black highway – but the chill air of late Autumn prompted Mia to zip her navy-and-red Tommy Hilfiger jacket up to her chin. Her car (or rather, the car that Frank wasn't using at that particular moment) wasn't very far away but when she reached it she felt a bit of a letdown that her excursion for the day was at an end; she hadn't a job so she didn't often have an excuse to get around all that much. She caught her reflection in the car window and unconsciously tilted her head like a fashion model, admiring the work the girls at La Belle Dame had wrought. It was a shame to simply scurry home and waste it. She knew that Frank really didn't give a shit, not because he had outgrown such shallow desires as a hot piece of ass but because he just didn't give a shit; and she had long since stopped giving a shit about whether he gave a shit. And as for Gabriel, the *other* man in her life...well, what they shared transcended mere issues of appearance. Mia did the makeover for *herself*. And perhaps she did it for...*others* as well, as a peacock's feathers do, as flame does. And anyway, a girl just has to look pretty.

No, I'm not going to waste it, she thought, as she turned away from the car and started walking down the shopping island. On this side of the highway there were a whole bunch of such places, and if she went a little further she'd reach the Mall. It was four and the teenagers were out in force, drifting by in chatty, arrogant packs; she had always found them to be upsetting creatures, full of unpredictable movements and loud voices and so stupidly sure of themselves, so cocky. But now she kind of liked them, admired them. She realized that now with her own makeover, her own change, she could live out some of that, live it out for the very first time. She could just *taste* some of that energy, some of that optimism. And she thought of Gabriel when she saw them – Gabriel, a distilled version of their essence, or maybe a parody, or maybe a mockery, or maybe something better, an improvement, what all persons with pretensions to *carpe*

diem should aspire to. Gabriel was the form, and all those young persons dotting the sidewalks, clogging the doors, packed into cars – they were but the shadows, and soon they would grow old or, by some accident, die and rot. The key, Mia decided, was for the body to remain uncorrupted and frozen fascinated in its state of beauty and love of the instant.

Mia walked past one shopping island, navigated through a clot of parked cars, reached another shopping island, then continued on to the Mall, to that boxy construction that beckoned in the distance, towards signs looming large in colored glass and dormant lightbulbs – Toys R Us, Macy's, Applebees. But before she could get there she had to travel through a long, empty field filled with dry crabgrass and downy-tipped ragwort and bull thistle, home to abandoned, blasted-out tires and odd bits of mirrored glass and miniature Jack Daniels bottles and styrofoam Dunkin Donuts cups and plastic bags containing black, unrecognizable former lunches – but those were only the things you saw if you were looking down, if you weren't appreciating the sunny day and the refreshing, insistent October breeze. Mia was the type to look above the tall grass at the butterflies – that was who she was really, all this time, she only needed to liberate the swelling that prevented her from living it, she had to cut that swelling and let it drain out. To the left of her was the blacktop of the highway, and the steady hum of cars escaping the City and of trucks burden-laden. And to the right: infinity. The field stretched out forever, it seemed, like an abandoned pasture or a tract of land on the verge of being developed. And the promise of the Mall drove her on, and as she walked she heard a faint hissing sound, like air escaping slow from a balloon, and when it got a little louder she looked about her to divine where it was coming from, and then suddenly something soft and misty rose up in front of her eyes, clouding her vision, and that was when she realized that her face was smoking. She looked immediately down at her freshly-manicured hands and sort of did a half-hop of horror when she saw that they were red and streaming. And then Mia quickly turned around and ran back to her car in a panic, her face in her hands, a trail of gray vapor in her wake.

(Lesson #1: Wear Sunscreen)

*** **

Gabriel, who had been spending more and more time at the Cefalu residence as of late, even sleeping over some nights in the unpainted, unfinished room that was theoretically being saved for a nursery, handed Mia ice wrapped in a light blue towel. She sat shaking on the ledge of her bathtub, the skin of her face and her hands a deep crimson; she took the towel and buried her face in it. The vague smell of baked flesh clung to the air.

"Thanks," she said in a tiny, muffled voice. "I feel so *stupid*..."

The boy in the periwinkle hooded sweatshirt, who appeared to be no more than 15 or 16 years old, tensed at the woman's distress. It wasn't the good distress, the distress women expressed when they were happy. It was the *bad* distress – the ruddy noses, the sobs, the frowns terminating in the folds of their gentle jowls. His sister Pris never cried, but she was often distressed a lot, too – and he always wanted so badly to make her feel better. So too with Mia, only there was a bit more desperation with her, a bit more of a desire. Because unlike Mia, Pris had many things – had her whores Boris & Ivan, had her company, had her Clan. Oh sure, he assumed he was a part of Clan Generra too, by virtue of Pris's leadership status; but Gabriel never felt much of an attachment to any group, and the most fleeting of attachments to individuals, Pris and the woman in front of him sobbing into the blue towel excepted. The boy was more of a maverick, and an observer. His incredible beauty – which he himself cynically acknowledged but only as the inexplicable quirky reaction of others – made him the constant target of much amorous and lustful attention, from other vampires as well as humans. It was all just a parade of marble-eyed hunger; he left their drained bodies all over New York City. Mia might have been one of those women, had she not changed when she did, and now she was neither human nor vampire, and truly a child in the world, and never did Gabriel have a chance such as this to contribute anything of value to another besides sweet sleep.

"It's not a big deal," Gabriel said to her, placing one of his delicate, pale

hands on her shoulder. Then he paused for a moment deep in thought, and corrected himself. "Actually, it is pretty important, remembering to put on the lotion. Because you could die if you don't."

Mia removed the towel and looked at the boy; her face was still red and slightly peeling in some areas on her cheeks and forehead. "I know...I just completely forgot that they scrubbed it off when they did my facial and manicure." She wrapped her hands in the towel, savoring the damp coolness against her raw skin. "It was just so *scary*, being so far away from the car, and my skin burning..."

"Being covered is like the most important thing you can do," he said in his usual calm, almost monotone voice. "You always have to think about it. You always have to think about being a vampire, always. And making sure you have the lotion on is the easiest thing you can do...maybe that's why you forgot it. There are just so many other ways to get snuffed. The easy stuff, you have to do."

Mia managed to shrug out a half-hearted smile.

"*Well?* Do you like my makeover?"

Gabriel rubbed the dark skin under his eye.

"It's very red," he replied matter-of-factly.

*** **

When Frank, dressed in his blue and black police uniform, came home late that night he found Gabriel asleep on the couch, the large TV casting rapidly blinking colored light upon his motionless body. It didn't bother him that the boy was there -- after all, bringing the urchin into his small but decent family was exactly what he had set out to do, to civilize him. After witnessing so many young people, just like the jumbled pile of cotton, bone, and sinews who slept so peacefully before him, fall into the bottomless well of indeterminacy, ambling into the obdurate jaws of drug addiction, delinquency, and prostitution -- it felt so rewarding to make a difference. And he was also so pleased that the boy had

removed his beat-up suede Pumas before he got on the couch; little things like that were very important to Frank, and he suspected they were important to Gabriel as well. That's why he liked him, he wasn't like those other smart-assed kids, he possessed a core of decency and maturity about him that he knew would blossom one day into an upstanding member of society. Just like Chachi.

The tall, muscular man gingerly removed the remote from the boy's still cold hand and clicked it; the image on the screen immediately collapsed into a bright white rectangle, then a dot. Shit, Frank thought. It's dark in here. He felt his way in the dark – stumbling on the matted tangle of wires from the Super Nintendo, his hand blindly thumping against the cool glass of framed photographs – until he reached the light by the staircase. When he got to the bedroom Mia was under the covers and dead to the world as well, one lean long arm sticking outside the sheets and the duvet. He unzipped his thick black leather jacket and hung it up in the walk-in closet, pulled off his v-neck navy-blue sweater and placed it on the special padded hanger that would prevent any warping on the shoulders, unbuttoned his shirt and after carefully sniffing the pits dropped it in the plastic hamper, removed his shoulder-holster and his belt and put the safety on his guns and put them away in his nighttable, removed his pants and folded them carefully on the crease and hung them on the special trousers hanger, removed his black socks and carefully sniffed them and rolled them up and put them in the sock-drawer, and he walked into the bathroom to do his business and complete his dental hygiene ritual, and when it was all over and his gums were properly scraped out and his teeth gleaming, he put on his pajamas and went to bed. And about 15 minutes later, when his breathing assumed a slow, predictable rhythm, Mia opened her eyes and silently scuttled down the stairs.

But Gabriel was gone.

*** **

Twelve blocks away, on the outskirts of Shore's End, where the suburban

flavor of the End proper watered down into urban Nassau and fed into Queens, 15-year-old Alejandra Panther slept under several mismatched blankets and comforters in her small bedroom. Her hair crunched around her tan face in tight, black curls slick with relaxer and long, dark eyelashes were spread like fans over her closed lids. The girl's body still retained the fleshy, rounded quality of her younger years, and in the light of her and her classmates' burgeoning adulthood it made her feel inadequate. Oh, her family didn't mind how she looked, but *they* weren't going to be dating her. They just wanted to keep her there forever, in that little rowhouse – they didn't want to see her *fly*. "Latinas are *supposed* to have some meat" her Tia would say; but that wasn't the reality of it. Reality was the world you stepped into with your peers and the people who could push you life forward -- reality was that pretty skinny girls got ahead in life and were admired and had lots of dates, and all that other talk of her chubbiness being the "way things were supposed to be" was in denial of that reality. Reality was as plain as the nose on your face, and it wasn't the way things were supposed to be, but the way things were – and Alejandra, though she loved her family, could see that they would never reach that level she had already achieved, they hadn't the ability to move past themselves and their little world into the greater achievements and opportunities of Society. And she indeed lost some weight lately, despite the resistance from her *parientes*, despite the huge supermarket-size brown-bag lunches that her Tia, like a Stormtrooper, made sure was in her hand every day as she walked out the door; the raw, wrinkled index finger of her left hand (the one people were less likely to notice) testified to *that*.

Alejandra had absolutely hated the drab, mint-colored paint on the walls, an artifact from another time, inlaid with divots and cracks – pulling a "Trading Spaces" type redecoration project on her room wasn't exactly on the top of her family's list of priorities, though her Tia's husband kept talking of this fabled time when the house would be made over and sold and they would move east to a larger house in Mineola, maybe even Shore's End. In an attempt to blot out the banal color and all its attendant imperfections out of her sight she had taped up pinups from her magazines from the baseboards to the ceiling, taped them one

after another so that no wall showed between the cracks – Eminem and Avril Lavigne and Josh Hartnett and Shakira and Ashton Kutcher and Justin Timberlake and Jennifer Lopez and Orlando Bloom, each of all reproduced within the frame of a sheet of typing paper. An elaborate but old secretary desk, the varnish over the rich mahogany laced with tiny crackle, stood by the window – she received it from her Madrina when Alejandra was still a baby, an odd Christening present to be sure. Inside the glass cabinet were crammed stuffed animals and books, photographs and softball trophies – on the mantle created by her headboard rested even more. The evidences of a life.

A quick, flat tapping sound roused her out of her sleep; for some reason it brought to her mind the pecking of a bird's hard beak against glass. She frowned, turned to her side, and closed her eyes tighter – but she heard it again, this time doubled, insistent. She rolled onto her back and stared wide at the ceiling – now she couldn't go back to sleep, now she was terrified, now she was convinced that someone was trying to break into the house. In her peripheral vision she caught the glimpse of the form by the window, but was too afraid to look directly at it.

"T-Tia..." she intoned warily, caught between the instinct to scream and the instinct not to raise hell at 3:00 in the morning. She waited for the shape to make a move, to break the glass, to pry the window open, *something*–

Tap. Tap tap.

What was he waiting for?!, she wondered anxiously. And she knew it was a *he*, knew it was some perverted motherfucker or a drug addict looking to sell her jewelry for crack, or...

Tap. ("Alejandra...") Tap tap.

She brought her hands to her mouth and held her breath. A voice, in her head, speaking her name...was she dreaming? She *had* to be dreaming. And the form at the window, a shadow – a shadow but for the eyes, eyes that glowed golden, light refracted into dozens of points, like stars.

("Alejandra? Alejandra?") Tap.

Or perhaps this was an alien abduction? That talking in her skull...maybe soon her whole body would be paralyzed? Or a visitation by the "old hag," a

weight on her chest, sucking the life out of her...

She would grab one of her trophies from atop the headboard, she would throw it –

("No. Alejandra, listen to me...")

That light...that golden light, it bounced off the surface of her dark brown eyes, and the contact with it left her...somehow...*reasonable*...

She pushed the blankets back with her feet and slowly climbed out of the bed, bare feet upon carpet, the shape by the window coming more and more into focus with each step. And what awaited her was not hulking, gorilla-furred brute of her nightmares, not the gray aliens from the X-Files, not even the wizened snaggle-toothed succubus of legend. What was framed in the window was, quite simply, the most beautiful boy she had ever seen. He looked like the image of an angel from one of Tia's chromoliths – eyes large and shining divinely in gold, a fine, tapered face and a sweet red cradle of a mouth, almost as pretty as a girl. Tia had spoke of visitations and visions believers had received of the Virgin Mary...could this have been the same, was she face-to-face with an actual angel?

("Alejandra, open the window. I have no place to go. Open the window, please...")

The tan girl's fingers pushed with some minor difficulty the rusty metal latch until it slid out and to the left with a click. Then she pulled the window open, and a gush of cold air flooded into her room and swept her black curls away from her face. A bouquet of gooseflesh ran up her body as the connection was made with the vampire.

"Thanks," he said. "Can you invite me in? My parents kicked me out."

"S-sure," the teenager croaked, her voice dry. "Come in."

Gabriel climbed gracefully into her room, his feet soundless. His eyes took in every necessary detail of the room with one sweep, then approached the girl, savoring the softable shoosh of her breath and the familiar, comforting tick of her pulse. She was about an inch taller than him, and it was a bizarre sensation for her to be experiencing the feelings she was having at that moment for a mere

boy...

"*Alejandra*," Gabriel said, sticking his elegant, finely-veined cold hands under the cuffs of her nightgown and letting them travel up the heated skin of her arms. "I just want you to know – that you really *are* very pretty. If you weren't pretty, Alejandra, I wouldn't have come to you." Her eyes were locked on his, on the golden light that held her body secure and full of love like an embrace; the girl's head nodded a couple times as if she was drifting to sleep but trying to stay awake. Finally her head dipped towards his. "I just want you to know these things," Gabriel continued, as his mouth widened and his head leaned in.

*** **

She could *smell* him – Mia could smell Gabriel, the trail he left from the couch to the door out into the blind indigo night. Was this part of being a vampire, the smelling, the tracking, the hunting down like mindless hound, throwing on her husband's old gray trenchcoat over her thin yellow nightie and jumping in the car and slamming her slippered foot against the accelerator – *Amazing*, she thought, as she drove almost by autopilot, led by the vampire's invisible wake and nothing else, block after block, until she reached the part of town she rarely visited, dormant storefronts and neon signs foreign. And she knew he was doing this to *feed*, dammit. She knew he *had* to do it; however, she assumed he had always gotten his fill at his usual haunts in Manhattan, before staying at her place. But how long had he stayed this time at the house? Three days? *No*, she said to herself as she made a sharp right, almost clipping a garbage can, *I know he has to feed*.

She parked across the street from the timeworn but dignified row of brick houses; she could pinpoint the exact home, the one with the green awning, the one with the moss-covered white plaster Mary sitting in the middle of the tiny yard...the exact *window*...

Mia cast her slippers to the curb and trod with care the concrete steps that led to the porch, deftly climbing from an old green lawn chair to the railing to the

post and up and over to the awning. Perhaps in her previous life such acrobatic maneuvers would have overwhelmed her, send her long limbs flying in all sorts of awkward directions, precipitating a clatter that would alarm half the neighborhood – but now she possessed a certain facility of movement, a kind of mechanical grace that she intuitively recognized that she had only begun to explore.

But the circumstances of her turning aside, nothing in her life prepared her for the scene she witnessed through the open window.

A teenage girl was sitting on the floor, back propped up against the foot of her bed, head bent back at a severe angle and resting upon the top of her mattress, hair splayed, neck ripped in half and a long, thick, messy red stripe issuing forth across her chest and full in her lap. Mia couldn't make out the girl's expression other than that her mouth was hanging open. In the background she could make out Gabriel's slight form sitting at the head of the bed, one leg flat on the mattress and one bent casually at the knee, digging through a heart-shaped ceramic box; the lower half of his face, from midway the bridge of his nose down, plastered in blood.

Mia's pupils dilated in shock and revulsion until the black almost crowded out the hazel of her irises, and it wasn't eased by Gabriel's dreamlike lifting of his head and the acknowledgment of her he made with his expressionless eyes. And then another feeling gripped her, this one instinctive and patently irrational – jealousy. She made a motion to enter the window but was prevented from doing so as if the glass was still in place. In bewilderment, the woman tentatively tapped with her fingers at that barrier between where she was and the inside the house. It was impenetrable.

("Mia, you have to be invited before you can come in.")

*** **

Once they got into the car Mia dug out a half-drunk bottle of spring water and an old t-shirt from the backseat and gave them to Gabriel, instructing him to clean off his face; that was the last thing she said to him for quite some time

during the ride. Gabriel was puzzled at this, and worse than being puzzled he detected her discomfort once again, discomfort colored a murky brown around her aura, and he just couldn't live with that.

As the car approached the Cefalus's split-level Colonial, Gabriel finally broke the silence.

"You've stopped talking," he said, not so much a complaint as an observation.

Mia's hands tightened on the beige leather steering wheel, flexing and tightening...

Gabriel began again: "Why have you stopped talking to me, Mia?"

"You're a *murderer*, Gabriel," she replied, cracking a pain-filled wry smile, keeping her eyes on the road.

"So are you," Gabriel said, still bewildered by the woman's reaction.

"I NEVER KILLED ANYBODY!" she spit back, looking upon him full in fury. The car had just reached Mia's block, but she never slowed down, just kept driving past it.

"That was our house," the boy said, pointing at the vision that blurred past the car window.

"That's MY house, Gabriel – my house with Frank! It's not *your* house! Not your *life*! I didn't invite you here so you could go feeding in my neighborhood!"

"But I didn't feed in your neighborhood, Mia. That's why I went so far away."

(Lesson #2: Don't Shit Where You Eat)

"Don't you see, Mia," he continued, "that's why I went to the poor neighborhood. People get killed in those neighborhoods at a much higher rate than in yours — so it won't seem so out-of-the-ordinary. Besides, police are less likely to make a big investigation if Spanish or black people die. Of course, I often ignore this rule myself and go after rich white women – but I've been around so long and I get so *bored*! Still, I try not to kill them in my neighborhood."

Mia was so enraptured by the horrible logic in the boy's voice, the things

Unspeakable that he just spoke to her with all the emotion of recounting how he built a sandwich.

"Y-you're a murderer...the way you killed that girl... Jesus..."

"She was *food*, Mia. And Jesus doesn't have a whole lot to do with it – I think that's where you're getting confused."

"I'm not talking about Bible-thumping morality here, Gabriel! I'm talking about basic human decency!"

"We're not human, Mia. I'm not human. You're almost not human."

"I DIDN'T ASK FOR THIS TO HAPPEN TO ME!" she screamed, almost losing control of the steering wheel and narrowly missing a parked car.

"Mia," the boy said, extending his hand towards her and letting his fingers graze the arm of her coat, "I never asked for this either. But here we are. We're vampires. And food for vampires is blood. Just like food for humans are cows and pigs and sheep."

(Lesson #3: Meat Is Not Murder)

"But if that how we have to exist...maybe we really *are* better off dead."

"Then we would be murdering *ourselves*. How is murdering ourselves ok and murdering humans not ok and murdering animals ok?" The boy rubbed his chin. "The way I look at it, we're just part of one large continuum: one long chain of feeding. When a lion eats an antelope, it isn't murder."

An idea suddenly popped in Mia's head.

"Why don't we just suck the blood of animals," she asked hopefully, "go 'vegetarian,' you know?"

Gabriel looked back at her with his deep, beautiful, blue dead eyes.

"Ask a lion to go vegetarian."

*** **

No, the boy thought. Mia wasn't quite ready to embrace the completion of her turning with the level-headedness and acceptance that was required to make

the final passage a smooth one. Sooner or later she was going to be driven to make her first kill, and in her current mindset the event would be a trainwreck. The first kill, Gabriel decided, should either be performed in the primal, hunger-mad state of innocence he himself underwent almost twenty years ago, or it should be done with full self-disclosure and all hangups and open philosophical debates resolved. And Mia already had too much time to think, to contemplate her new life – it wasn't ultimately beneficial for her to proceed in this matter, no. Perhaps...it was time to introduce her to her own kind. There wasn't a bit more he could do with her here as her teacher.

And so Gabriel suggested to Mia that they take a little "field trip" to New York City.

"The City?" Frank asked when the two of them were in bed, putting down the issue of Men's Health he was reading and regarding her with a bemused smile. "You sure you're up to that, honey?"

"I-I think so. If I'm ever going to be...*employed* again, I'll have to get used to the commute."

"But you can just get a job here in Long Island. I mean, *Melville* alone's got plenty of places you could work at...you know, answering phones, filing. You could start out temping just to get your feet wet."

"Yeah, I guess so," Mia said, finding herself unexpectedly knocked off on a tangent, idly teasing her brown-and-gold bangs with her fingers. "But actually I was thinking about maybe finishing that book, you know."

Frank squinted, trying to picture the contents of the wicker basket in the livingroom that held her paperbacks.

"What book do you need to finish?"

"My book."

He looked at her blankly.

"My *book*!" Mia repeated sharply, banging her fist beside her into the mattress. "My book. The one I was working on when I *met* you, remember? You never ever ask me about the book!"

"Alright, alright," Frank snapped back, pulling his body up in the bed and

raking his fingers through his dark, wavy hair. "There's no need to get violent, Mia! For Christ's sake!"

His wife's face broke into regret; she flattened out her fist, touching and retouching the mattress with her palm in a staccato fashion. "I-I'm not *violent*...I was just trying to make a point. I'm sorry..."

"Think about how I feel, being yelled at. It's stressful."

"I-I'm sorry, Frank. I must be having my period soon I guess."

He stretched his arm out as a prompt, extended it as plant life does towards the sun in speeded-up time lapse photography, and Mia, her arms folded in front of her chest, leaned forward and in until she was snug in his flannel embrace. He took one of his strong, olive-skinned hands and brushed her cheek tenderly, tracing a line from just under her eye to the crook of her mouth.

"There's never a good reason to yell, Mia..."

"I know."

She had stopped menstruating last month, after several cycles of merely spotting. She often wondered what exactly was going on in there, in her womb, in her stomach and her lungs and her heart.

*** **

Mia Cefalu sat leaning against the base of The Maine Monument at Columbus Circle, right at the mouth of Central Park. She was dressed in a thick olive-green corduroy jacket, a long light brown skirt with an abstract Chinese lettering print, and a pair of brown Timberlands (because Gabriel said they would be doing a fair amount of walking); tied around her neck was a bright orange silk scarf. Even for such a nippy, windy day there were a fair amount of people draped about the structure, eating lunches and planning their next journeys and taking photographs before the monument's biggest attraction, the statues that rode upon the prow of the limestone ship that jutted forth, half-sprung, from the monument: mythic, sightless figures that represented such intangibles as Victory, Courage, Fortitude, Justice, and Peace. The woman looked down at her watch

and frowned. Where was he? Did he even own a watch? And she didn't expect to be meeting Gabriel so far uptown for her "vampire lessons." She always sort of assumed that the undead – clad in leather jackets and motorcycle boots and spiked collars, sporting sexy, heavy-lidded eyes and teased hair and spider-bracelets and looking like something out of Kiefer Sutherland's pack from *The Lost Boys* – would congregate mostly in the "wild" areas of the City, in the Village and Alphabet City and maybe even some of the darker areas of Chelsea. She regarded the ugly grey mirrored buildings that were being constructed across the way, twin leviathans that echoed the landscape that surrounded the Park, of skyscrapers and owers that constantly reminded you of its banal presence no matter where in the woods you buried yourself – you only needed to look up and see them staring down at you like giant cyclopes.

Mia kicked at the gray-white step in front of her with her boot, savoring the scrape of her sole against the limestone – so *this* was where Frank wanted her to work, eh? This environment, only reduced to its most basic, unvarnished form in the wastes of Melville, L.I.. That's where they always wanted her to work, that was the plan, even towards her last years of high-school – some nice secure little something where she could type and maintain schedules. *Godammit*, she thought, *no!* No, this whole...change...it was certainly the confirmation she was looking towards the heavens to provide, it gave her the courage to break out of those societal expectations and the limitations of what they told her she could ever achieve.

Where was Gabriel? She stood up and walked away from the monument; strayed into the graveled area that fed into the park, rubbed her arms, then walked back. She turned in the direction of Broadway and stepped one foot into the street, looking down the avenue and squinting past the masses of people in the hopes of spotting him. To her shock, she saw Sting, dressed in a trial-print silk shirt, jeans, and calf-high buckskin boots; he looked sort of small, not in height but in his bearing, the bearing of a person who did not want to be noticed. Before he reached Columbus Circle he turned a corner. Twenty minutes later, after Mia had resumed her seat on the steps of the monument and was

reluctantly reading a Jews for Jesus pamphlet that she had found on the sidewalk, she felt a sudden chill on her left side.

"Hi," Gabriel said, making a circular gesture with his left hand as if he was washing a window.

Her initial impulse was to give him a hug in greeting, but realized there was no acceptable context for it at 1:00 in the afternoon on the steps of The Maine; she gave him a light punch on his periwinkle-colored hoodie instead.

"You're late," she playfully chided him.

"*Patience*," he answered with an inscrutable grin.

(Lesson #4: Learn To Keep Occupied, Because You Might Be Here For A While)

"I saw Sting."

"The Police," the boy answered in recognition.

"It was really cool...I mean, he was just standing there for real, in front of me..."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"No...he wasn't directly in front of me. He turned a corner before he reached me. Do – do you think he *knew*, about me? Is that what he turned the corner, you think?"

"Maybe where he had to go was right around that corner."

It wasn't a particularly sunny day, but now even those few rays of sunlight had been covered by a mass of clouds – no, not clouds, just one big mass of white that took over the sky, throwing a weird light upon where they sat, upon the limestone monument and the gravel patch leading into the park and the gray mirrored buildings under construction across the avenue and the huge silver globe at the crossroads.

"Gabriel, can people *sense* it? What we are?"

"Not really the masses – I mean, some will become really attracted to us and stuff and not be sure why, but it certainly don't keep them away. But a few have that 'spider-sense' about vampires, I guess, and will just get alarmed

without us doing anything. You'll know quickly who they are, with practice. They usually aren't very subtle, about hating us – usually either have a spook on them, like they're going to freak out, or else they've got that self-righteous vampire slaying vibe. Our kind are far better dissemblers." The boy scratched his left elbow. "Does Frank suspect anything, yet?"

Mia's body spasmed slightly as if she had suddenly jarred herself awake after reaching the edge of sleep.

"S-suspect?"

"About you being a vampire. About me being a vampire."

"I-I don't think so..."

"Thinking so isn't safe enough. You have to make sure your lies and stories are air-tight."

(Lesson #5: Learn To Lie)

"Frank is a really...*realistic* sort of man. I don't think if aliens landed on our front lawn he would really believe they were there even if he saw them with his own eyes, you know? But I try. I try. I try to lie."

A Nordic-looking family sat on the steps in front of them – mother, father, and two small sons, all shock-haired blond dressed in colorful layered clothing. It appeared that they had just exited Central Park, heavily wrinkled zoo brochures in the boys' hands, the father holding an orange balloon with a graphic of a tiger on it. Their backs grazed the tips of Mia's Timberlands and Gabriel's Pumas. The two vampires, roused by the thick blue veins that marked the brood's pink necks and fine capillaries that laced the ruddy tips of their ears, exchanged subtle glances at each other.

Gabriel got to his feet and stretched his left arm up and bent it behind his head.

"I'm hungry, aren't you?"

"I-I guess..." Mia muttered, half in a daze, staring at the dry, freshly-shaved skin of the underside of the Nordic father's chin as he turned to speak to

his wife, recent shaving nick still fresh under a thin layer of clot, carotid bulging –

"Well, we can't eat here," the boy said, tugging a lock of her hair gently.
"Let's look for a place further downtown."

*** **

The pair walked down Broadway, the arcade of dormant lights and giant placards of Times Square looming and getting larger in the background. Mia had remembered walking down these streets when she was younger, before she married Frank – rather, in *theory* she remembered these streets. She was supposed to remember them, because it was a fact that she had walked there. But she didn't truly remember it, anymore than she remembered visiting the Museum of Natural History when she was eight or the Statue of Liberty. What was it exactly about turning into a vampire that made one's previous life like a set of postcards, and one's current life like a motion picture that is perpetually rolling around you?

"You know, I was kind of surprised that you asked me to meet around here..."

"Really?" the boy answered distantly; he was walking a couple of paces in front of Mia, his eyes drifting deliberately from one person to another, scanning the majority of the people who were walking in the opposite direction. Men, women, black, white, adult, child, it didn't matter...he passed solely on the obese and the elderly, and truth be told on a hungry night they'd probably be on the menu as well. In the beginning he only stalked and seduced and sucked older women, women that reminded him of his dead mother or his very much alive but unavailable sister – any conflicted oedipal feelings washed away in the blood of his turning. But with the aging of his mind, if not his body, came the ability for range and expanded horizons.

"I never really considered this area the...the *hangout* for our kind."

"Oh, there are plenty of us around here. My sister works not too far from here."

"She...*works*?"

"Sure. She's VP of the company that makes the lotion."

"Wow. That's pretty convenient."

"Yep," the Gabriel answered, eyeballing a tall boho dude with rockabilly hair and black, thick, horn-rimmed glasses. "If you ever need any extra bottles of Victorian Allure, let me know, we have an entire cellar full."

"So everyday people who work can be like us?"

"That's what Pris and her associates are trying to do, at any rate. I don't think it's going to work, though. They want to be like humans. It's not going to work."

They were now almost in Times Square proper, walking under the bare marquee of an abandoned theatre. The gray, overcast sky had darkened with the passing minutes just the right degree to trip off the lights in the giant fiberglass advertisements and above the gigantic billboards, and the Square came alive, piece by piece, just like an awakened dragon shaking the sleep off of its scales. The streets were now clogged with cubicle refugees.

"Why are you so *negative*?" Mia asked, crinkling her nose. "*I* want to be like a human...and I know I *can* be."

Gabriel unexpectedly stopped, almost tripping Mia in mid-stride. He gave her a strange look, strange for Gabriel because usually he was so expressionless, so zen. But the look...it struck Mia as terrible. Inexplicable, but certainly there, and it was a vision she would carry around with her and return to in odd moments for the rest of her life.

"*Humans*! Why would *anybody* want to be human? I know why *you* want to – because it's all you know. Not because it's *so great*." His mouth hung open raggedly as he spoke, the milky-white tips of his fangs dipping in-and-out of sight. "Humans are mostly stupid and dull, and they're all hungry, even hungrier than us, but they can never fix that hunger like we can. So they go oppressing people and buying stupid things and stuffing their faces and complaining. Then their bodies become sick and old and compromised – and even then, when they're in pain and feeble and ready to kick off they're obsessed with staying alive. Why

should they fear death so much, if their good Lord is waiting for them? It's because deep down they know there is nothing waiting for them but *oblivion*! So they struggle and gasp and beg and take pills and get hooked up to machines, and *they* are supposed to be the species that deserves to survive? Doesn't that fly in the face of evolutionary theory? Shouldn't it be *us*? Aren't we much more suited to reality? For what is reality anyhow but the living for today? Today is all that truly exists, it's the only thing that's real that we have to go on. And because humans so pathetically cling to their spiritual pipe dreams they are justified to hunt us down and eliminate us from the planet? And so they also continue to slaughter and eat the other species they consider 'soulless,' when there are perfectly good vegetables and beans they can eat? Why not eat the vegetables and beans? Because they want something 'substantial,' right, something *satisfying*. So do we. We are suited to the blood of humans, not dogs or goats or chickens or rats. And so we have the right to feed. And *tonight*, Mia, *you are going to feed!*"

And did the humans, of which there must have been hundreds flooding through that crowded Broadway street, pay any mind to a word the boy said, did any one among them comprehend or take seriously or even question the vampiric philosophy and conspiracy that was so comprehensively laid out for them on that sidewalk? No, not a one – if they noticed Mia and Gabriel at all it was to jostle them out of their way with their briefcases and purses and knapsacks and hands heavy-laden with shopping bags, or to even curse them for being so inconsiderate as to stand still and block the way of their important comings and goings.

*** **

When they reached the 30s, Gabriel suddenly switched directions and led Mia away from Broadway and traveled east. The boy had suggested to Mia that if along the way she spotted a suitable feast for her virgin feeding to let him know and he'd gauge the feasibility of it and perhaps they'd go for it. But of course Mia

never said a word, even when her body truly wanted to – Gabriel was determined to introduce her to her first bleeding on this excursion and Mia was equally determined to prevent it. OK...maybe Mia wasn't exactly so determined. After all, she had been infected for quite a long time now – and, though she had been demonstrating many of the typical symptoms of the turning, Gabriel was surprised she hadn't gone all the way yet and cast off her human shell for good. Holding on this long just wasn't normal, but the boy hadn't an undead doctor he could have consulted about the matter. However, the completion of her Change was inevitable and immanent, and for all her protestations he was sure that what she had truly wanted and needed more than anything else in the entire world at that point was a nice, thick bite.

They hit Lexington Avenue and headed downtown again, passing by a series of blocks that seemed to contain nothing but Indian restaurants. The sky had turned nearly black in the meantime, and Mia's eye clung to the tableau on a storefront window of the dark sky reflected over a collection of Hindu statues, a hot pink neon sign advertising a Tandoori takeout shining down on them, and her reflection superimposed over all. She felt Gabriel flick her arm with his hand, and when she turned around she saw a group of about 5 or 6 teenagers standing before her. She knew what they were before she even had a chance to actually look at them. Their hard faces shocked her...these were faces of vampires, sans the beatific gloss of Gabriel's uncommon beauty or the studied, calculating mask of camaraderie such as Rachel, the woman who turned her, possessed. And though physically, down to the trendy coats that they wore and the hip sneakers on their feet, they appeared to look no different from the young people that biked down the tree-lined streets of Shore's End and populated their shopping centers and Dairy Queens, some sort of interior, invisible quality shone through that made Mia fear them. And did they not like her? It looked like they didn't like her.

"Mia, these are some of my friends," Gabriel said, his standard near-monotone tempered with a surprising dash of cordiality. Mia held her arm out in front of her in an awkward motion that was partially a wave and partially an invitation for a handshake; a gesture that was not reciprocated. A curly-haired

blond girl, dressed in a long plush zebra-print coat and wearing a pretty child's face marred with pockmarks, looked at Mia dubiously.

"Like, how old *are* you?" the girl asked.

"Uhm...almost thirty."

"I'm 45," she answered almost as a retort, as if the advanced years had given her an edge or some sort of extra power or something; heck, Mia thought, it probably did.

"*Be nice*," Gabriel warned playfully, tucking his hand into the crook of Mia's elbow cheekily. "This is my *sister* you're talking to."

A white boy with brown dreads tipped in metal caps, wearing a green army utility jacket over a gray Abercrombie and Fitch sweatshirt, sneered, his left fang completely exposed.

"You already *got* a sister, Gabriel."

"So what, Stewart? Is there a rule you have to have only one?"

"Yeah, like...but when you're undead and shit, man..."

Gabriel released Mia's arm and sidled up between the blond and Stewart.

"Mmmn, you're all my sisters and brothers here, right guys?" A short thin-boned Gothic girl with blue highlights in her flapper-style bob wrapped a skeletal but elegant gloved arm around Gabriel's chest from behind, and the boy leaned into her body sensuously at the touch. For some reason this particularly irked Mia, overlaid the inadequacy she already felt being in the presence of the first vampires she met besides him and Rachel. She became hyper-aware of the school-marmish quality of her clothes, the fact that most of these "kids" were older than her but far hipper than she had ever been in her entire life. And for all of Gabriel's cynicism and lone-wolf approach to life, she never expected him to be leading an impromptu feel-up orgy with a group of vampires that frankly didn't seem all that remarkable or special. Or was she just being a cranky, jealous bitch?

She vowed to never wear corduroy again.

"Yo, Gabe," said a solemn-looking boy with a sharp, angular face framed by the furred hood of a puffy silver jacket. "I heard there's a veal party over at the

sausage factory tonight, you wanna come?"

"Fuck that, Nachie, you know I'm Generra."

"Aw, c'mon, just a little hit-and-run action," the gothic girl whispered audibly in Gabriel's ear. "It's your sister that Rache hates, anyway..."

Mia, who had been detaching herself from the scene millimeter by millimeter, retreating back to the tableau in the Tandoori Express window, threw her attention and her stare back upon the kids.

"Erm, excuse me? Did you say, 'Rachel?'"

"*Rache*," the blond girl corrected, rolling her eyes. "Know her?"

"I...I think I do...red hair? Short?"

"Yeah..."

"She...she was the one that bit me," Mia said, a smile that even she didn't understand spreading on her face.

The entire crew sort reeled back at the same time in awe and uttered variations of the expression "whoa!" The entire crew, that is, except for Gabriel, who appeared to be a little uncomfortable.

"Rache – turned YOU?!" the gothic girl said, bringing her bird's bone hands to her lips. "She hardly turns *anybody*!"

"R-really?" Mia said, unable to hide how flattered she felt.

"Rache mostly kills when she bites," Stewart explained, fingering one of his dreads.

"Well, shit," the blond girl said, shocking Mia by grabbing her hand with both of her own. "You're Rache's *childe*. Now we've *got* to go."

Gabriel reappeared at Mia's side, his arm this time wrapped tightly around her hip.

"Nope, fuck it, we're not going to a Caress party," he said, tension wavering in his voice.

"But Gabriel..." Mia protested.

"I said NO!"

*** **

Mia looked over her shoulder after a block or so of her and Gabriel leaving the other vampires behind, but they were gone. Probably took that turn around the corner like so many other people do. Anyway, they seemed a pretty unpleasant batch to her so she guessed it was no real loss...though she had to admit, after Rachel's name was dropped and they invited her to the feeding, she had an overwhelming desire...

"Didn't you want to hang out with your friends?" she asked the boy.

"They're not my friends," he replied without bitterness. The boy had fell back into his regular, even-tempered self as soon as they left the group, but even so there was an extra quietness about him, and extra tightness, and he now walked much closer to the woman, hands stuffed in the pockets of his hoodie but his arm brushing against hers. "They're *acquaintances*."

"Do...you have any friends that live here, in the City? Maybe we could ring them up..."

"Vampires don't have those type of relationships usually. Buddy relationships. It's either master/slave, or acquaintances. And acquaintances are fine. Acquaintances are pretty valuable, really, far more useful than buddies or whatever focused obsessive psychosexual slavery you've got going on this week. With acquaintances you can network. And when you network you can get a lot more food, and of good quality too, if you choose your acquaintances carefully. But friends? *Them*? I mean, what do *you* think?"

(Lesson #6: Cultivate Acquaintances For Networking Opportunities)

"I don't know...I always pictured vampires as living in packs and hanging out like big families and stuff..."

The corner of Gabriel's upper lip curled up slightly.

"*Book* stuff," he said, letting out a soft cynical chuckle.

*** **

They headed down Lex until they hit Union Square Park, where they sat on a bench near the Gandhi statue. It was officially evening but the area pulsed as if night had never come. The trip was almost over and still Mia did not get her bleeding – Gabriel silently chided himself for the failure. Perhaps the party at the sausage factory could have been the ideal venue for her introduction to the pleasures and technique of feeding. But he just didn't want to go. And Generra wasn't welcome, anyway. And anyway this was something that the two of them were going to share together. Anyway.

And anyway, Mia *had* to go and mention it –

"Gabriel, I need to see her again."

"Rache is a psycho and doesn't give a shit about anybody," Gabriel said in a plain, even voice. "I'm not just saying this because she's the head of Generra's rival clan, either. Everybody knows it. And she's more of a danger to other vampires than she is to humans."

"But she let me *live*..."

"Probably was too damn lazy or preoccupied at the time to finish the job. She's not into increasing the vampire population. Best case scenario, she turned you out of spite because she really hated you and wanted to fuck up your life. Pretty *romantic*, isn't it?"

"W-we don't know that, Gabriel," Mia said weakly; while she too had entertained the notion that perhaps Rachel had bit her to punish her in some way, the thought that she simply cared so little about her that the turning was a mistake...a thoughtless, sloppy, unfeeling mistake...it was unthinkable. "And whatever might have happened – which we can never really travel back to and know the exact answer--she's my *sire* at any rate, and there's something there, a *bond*, and..."

The boy's relaxed face crinkled up once again, as if he had bit into something really sour, and he made a dismissive motion with his arm like he was trying push a door open.

"That's BOOK stuff, Mia! *Sire, childer*, all that shit! *Book stuff!* Sentimental

masturbation by humans who can only imagine what we're really like, that's all it is. And I know so many of us have co-opted it; doesn't make it any more true. There's no inherent bond between the blooder and the blooder – unless both parties choose to make it so, not just some school-kid fantasies entertained by one of the dancers. Do you think I feel anything for whoever turned me? I hardly remember anything about it! But if I *did* remember – *fuck* them! What the fuck do I care who did it? Should I give him or her a prize, should we all live in a happy commune together? It was just a fact of my life, a dot in the line of my history, and it has no bearing on today – today, which is the only real thing. You and me sitting here right now, the only real thing..."

The boy looked into Mia's eyes, eyes overlapping eyes, the clouds around his face parted and she saw a real pair of eyes – the tenderness of a child's eyes traced in fine hard pen, but for a second the window was open.

"I only wish it could have been *me* who turned you," he said gravely.

She felt his fingers lace into hers; and she was surprised that his skin did not feel cold, as they usually did, they felt just like her own.

*** **

Mia had parked the car uptown, and so the silliness of having to travel all the way from where she started from in order to get home would have to be undertaken. Though Gabriel lived with his sister in Soho, he insisted he accompany her on the train. The harsh overhead lights of the Union Square subway station was in shocking contrast to the gentle, ambient illumination of the park, and moreso to the altered golden eyes of the woman and her young companion. Equally disorienting was the noise – the cacophony of relentlessly marching commuters, the tinny squeal of metal wheels slicing down rails, the mighty drum roll of steel-plated cars shuffling, the booming garble of words through an antiquated P.A. system, the rolling melody of a subway performer's dark palms against a steel drum. The two were hand-in-hand pushing their way through the confusion, drilling down the steps to the platform for the Q.

The boy leaned against a red, decomposing metal beam and folded his arms.

"Well, I failed you."

"Gabriel, how can you say that," Mia said, gently resting her hands on his shoulders and giving them a squeeze. "I had a great time!"

"You know what I mean, Mia. I tried to teach you and I failed."

"I'll have you know, I learned a lot today – and I'm very grateful."

He moved away from the beam and began pacing around the woman, forcing her to turn slowly around to keep up.

"Just *theories*...without the Act, everything else is theory. You can't truly comprehend it."

"About the Act...I was thinking...I really think I'm going to go the 'veggie' route anyway, you know? I'm a 'veggie' sort of person..."

"See? I've taught you *nothing*." Then his face shone a hair darker.

"Though you certainly were ready to shack up at Rache's and feed."

"No, I...I realize it was just one of those – how did you put it? – 'pipe-dreams.' Not even a dream, a nightmare. Don't you see, Gabriel – it's just not what I'm about. I don't want to hurt people, even if it means my life is at stake. And you said it yourself, the turning is taking too long, anyhow. Maybe I'm not even really infected..."

"If you're burning up in sunlight, you're infected," the boy interrupted.

"But maybe it's all in my head, you know? Before...things happened...I used to be a hypochondriac, I used to get sick, all sorts of symptoms, for no reason. Or if for a reason, by suggestion or something, something I saw on TV, or just because I was feeling sad and frustrated...what if this is the same case here?"

"Rache *bit* you, Mia."

"But what if it was just a delusion? What if she really didn't bite me? My memories are so clouded about that day, who knows? Or this could all be a dream, this whole thing, like I'm trying to work things out..."

"I'm not a character in one of your dreams!" Gabriel shouted as he jumped

in place, shocking the woman out of her reverie. "Stop moving *backward*! You're moving further and further *backward*!"

Some of the commuters began to stare at the screaming boy, and Mia and him walked a little further down, to where an elderly Russian man was playing on a violin under the shelter of the underside of a stairway.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel," she said, putting her hand over her forehead and pressing in at her temples. "I know a lot of what I'm saying sounds stupid. It's just that all of this is too much for me to process all at once. I'm trying. And I really do appreciate you. What you're trying to do for me."

The boy looked down and kicked at a black piece of gum stuck to the platform. "It's no problem...I'm just sorry I'm getting all pissy and stuff. I'm not usually like this..." He brought his head back up and smiled at her lightly. "...which is not to say you're bringing this out of me."

"I know..."

"I just wanted you to learn the stuff you should know, that's all. We've got time. It's cool."

A train rumbled into the station; the two tensed up at its approach, but it was only a false alarm. Wrong train. The violinist finished a song, the tinkle of coin in his case.

"So Frank's going to be ok with you coming home this late?" Gabriel asked.

Frank. The name was like some big stone thing in her mind, a weighty landmark she was trying so hard to forget. Not because she didn't still love him. Of course she still loved him. Of course. It was just that his visage had no place in the world she just traveled through today, or even in the aspect of that world she carried around in her head. It was a complete disconnect, no way to bridge these two competing elements in her life.

"He's got a late shift today, so it should be fine."

"How is he doing, by the way?"

"Oh, fine...he's fine. He bought some new Super Nintendo cartridges through eBay that he couldn't wait to show you."

"That's cool." Silence. "Super Nintendo is pretty cool."

"It is. I mean, I don't really play that stuff, but I enjoy watching others play it."

"I used to like to play Frogger when I was young. Not Nintendo, but like the big machines? That was cool."

"Actually, Burger Time I could play. Burger Time was kind of fun."

Silence.

The violin was playing a song, it sounded familiar to Gabriel. It wasn't sounding familiar at first, at first it had just seeped into the audible texture of everything else on that platform, but there was a note, then a chord, that suddenly hooked the boy and made him hear, made him hear the song, and it was so naggingly familiar. He turned and looked at the old, bearded Russian, as if somehow that would give him a clue. His golden eyes fell on the shabby case at the man's feet, its worn red velvet interior littered with spare change and several crinkled bills. Then he felt Mia's arm clasp his shoulder – hard. It hurt.

"G-G-Gabriel..."

His head reeled around to face Mia's strained, bone-gray face gaping back at him in agony. The whites of her eyes had turned beet red, and her fangs (which he had never seen before and doubted she actually possessed) were lurching out of her mouth, slashing the bottom of her lips and sending a thin trickle of blood down her chin. She was shaking, her left arm bent and pressed to her chest in an awkward angle, like an injured wing.

"G-g-guh...I *guh...*I've got to feed!"

She began to hungrily eye the other persons on the platform, eyes passing wildly from an extended family of Chinese who were carrying heavy pink bags full of fresh produce, to a slim red-haired art student with her portfolio resting at her legs, to an oblivious sparse-haired man in a suit fiddling with his I-Pod. Gabriel, who had never seen or heard of such a spontaneous turning as this in his entire unlife, grabbed one of her ashen, claw-like hands and yanked her down the platform with him.

"*There's nothing to feed on here!*" he hissed in a panic, dragging her limp,

tremulous body towards the exit at the far end of the platform; to wind back up those stairs and out to the world was too complex a maneuver. And the irony of it--such a sea of potential feast, and none of it available. He never fed in the daylight, never chanced witnesses. And if Mia in her state were to slam her fangs into one of the sea, one of the feasts, under the harsh light of the station, in front of hundreds...it was too horrid to contemplate. But he knew a way...if he could just get them away from the bright sea...

He edged himself and Mia, holding a death's grip on her hand, to the very rim and terminus of the platform; after peering into the tunnel's inky depths for any signs of light and finding none, he jumped off and took her with him.

*** **

The boy pulled Mia through the darkness; his fully-realized vampire reflexes allowed him to navigate the soot-encrusted detritus on the floor of the tunnels and the old slabs of rail and track with a measure of feline grace, but the woman, flush in the fever of a spontaneous Awakening, could barely walk. It was as if the many months of relative normality after her initial bite, the many months of ignoring the prompting of her cravings, of avoiding the temptations that drove this burgeoning new element in her being, had finally caught up with her body all at once. She felt as if all the useable blood had depleted from her system, like a drain being uncorked; and now it was beyond a relatively simple case of feeding, now she no longer had the strength to talk, the strength to get for herself, and she experienced a dreadful sort of dissipation, of dissolving, an unquiet rest, the trail an impending death reducing everything to a mere pinprick in her vision. She stumbled on something immovable and metal, and allowed herself to fall, allowed her blood-soaked eyes to roll back, the contents of her brain disintegrating in little bubbles like an Alka-Seltzer tablet.

Gabriel was distraught and beyond horrified – so this was the Change proper, the final casting off of one's human clothes, without any blood to back it up. He dropped to his knees beside her, grabbing at her coat to help her up,

shaking her chin, his screams sounding to her ears as if submerged in water. He was losing her...if only there was some transit worker, some bum that he might grab and break their neck above her mouth! But there was no time. In the sparse but piercing light from the bare bulbs in yellow safety cases that hung about, he could see on her face the verge of oblivion, the bone-white skin drawn over her skull as if being sucked away by some terrible force, eyes two crescents of gleaming red –

He pulled his hooded sweatshirt over his head and off –

It was just like his mother, when he found her, weeks after the funerals, when him and his sister completed their own awakenings within the bounds of their pinewood boxes, clawing their way out, and then instinctually he started to dig his mother out, he knew she was there, assumed that she had changed along with him and Pris, and then using his newly-powerful hands to tear through the splintery, mouldering pine wood, and then pulling out that slick, dark-gray, lifeless arm –

He tore at the skin of his right arm with his sharp teeth, tore until he felt the veins and tasted his own wet mercury, then thrust it between Mia's lips, gasped as her fangs, after a tentative scrape, sunk into his flesh, biting him just for leverage, just letting that ready-made wound feed her – but it was not enough! She had regained some of her strength, but the boost only allowed her to get more agitated, searching, craving, increasing the panic, altering the senses, expending more energy that she did not have to spare –

He was not going to lose her again –

Gabriel pulled his T-shirt off, took Mia's head in his hands, and positioned her lips right above his heart.

"Bite it," he said breathlessly, steeling himself for the pain that was to surely follow.

(Lesson #7: Survive)

GOOD INTENTIONS

One might think it would have been difficult for such an infamous vampire as Rache Merrywether to enter a federal prison under the eyes of so many law enforcers and hoops and whistles in order to see her mother--but to assume that is to assume that the existence of vampires was taken to be fact by the general populace of Muggle, U.S.A.. Quite the contrary – the short vampire merely threw on a rather somber dark grey dress (countesy of one of the Unlucky), a pair of black pumps, and combed her long red hair back into a ponytail; a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses finished the ensemble, the prescription of its lenses unimportant as vampire-eyes were totally beyond such trifling measurements. The stocky middle-aged black guard with the humongous pendulous breasts bound up tight within the thick white material of her uniform found the iciness of Rache's skin – which radiated cold even through her clothes at pat-down – to be rather odd, but felt that as long as the strange cracker with the Ronald McDonald hair and the excruciatingly pale skin wasn't carrying a file strapped to her leg, it was none of her business. Rache, meanwhile, contemplated all the atrocities she would have performed on this stone-faced, humorless matron had they met under different circumstances.

As for proving that she was indeed the daughter of *Kinky*-killer Caril Merrywether – Caril, who, due to the fact that she purchased the weapon beforehand and left a hastily-written “assasination plan” on the back of an invoice, was not considered to be insane at the time of the murder and henceforth was pushing 25-to-life – it was easy enough to do. Rache had always retained a little wrinkled Ziploc bag containing the identification she carried when she was human--social security card, non-driver's ID, library card for the college she attended in her former life. No, the hard part wasn't getting into the place or waiting in the white, sickeningly-sterile phone booth for her mother to emerge and sit at the other end of that scratchitti-marked plexiglass. The hard part was simply contemplating this former life at all.

Then why was she here?

Names.

Rache sat impatiently in the hard plastic seat, the smell of other visitors and inmates inundating her senses and making her all *fidgety*. The blood of the prisoners especially, how it was tainted with a peculiar type of adrenalin –

Two female guards brought out Caril, Caril who looked so frail in her baggy orange prison togs and wrist-to-leg manacles--and looked so frigging crazy as well, with her bright red dyed hair grown out to her ears and blondish-white roots on top, sunken, wrinkle-streaked face and wide-eyed like Squeaky Fromme. *Yep*, Rache thought, as her mother enthusiastically tried to wave at her with her waist-chained wrists, *once a crazy bitch, always a crazy bitch*.

After a guard handcuffed Caril's released left hand to a pole by the booth, she picked up the phone with her right and said with her most motherly, oatmeal-cookie-straight-from-the-oven voice:

"Rachel! Baby! How are you! You've grown so big..."

The younger Merrywether stared back at her mother inscrutably, adjusting the annoying glasses on her face. Truth was, she felt nothing for this creature before her – in fact, she felt less for her than she did some recent meals. If feeling was measured backwards in terms of lack, that measure would be quite high as regards to the vampire's feeling for her mother. It wasn't a simple matter of being Undead and Heartless. She never quite connected with Caril. She never quite liked Caril. Caril made her feel like a mutant, her whole human life. And now she was queen of the mutants.

"Hey, Mom." she said without emotion.

"Did you see me on TV? Is that why you've come back to see me?"

"Yeah, I saw you."

"So you know about Kinky Witter, then?"

"That he's my dad? I suppose that's what they say. Though you always sort of hinted that my dad was Paul Simon."

"I thought he'd be a good role-model."

"So you killed my dad, Mom," Rache said into the phone with all the

nonchalant quality of referring to a sale at Bananna Republic.

“I *know*,” Caril answered, wincing apologetically as if she stepped on sonebody else’s foot and left a mark on their shoe. “Are you really upset? You can be honest with me, baby.”

“No, not really.” The vampire shifted her weight on the seat and smiled weirdly. “It’s just *funny*, that’s all. It’s just funny the way life turns out. It’s just...like news I’m connected to in some way, and it’s funny. I couldn’t really give a shit about him personally.”

“You really should listen to some of his albums, though, when you have a chance. ‘Flesh Aliens’ was on VH1’s Top 100 Glam-Rock Songs Of All Time.” Caril brought her face close to the Plexiglas and assumed a grave countenance. “It’s part of your *heritage*, you know.”

What, my heritage? You spreading your legs for some guy that didn’t even give a shit about you is MY heritage? No – my heritage – my BLOOD heritage – is far more illustrious, ancient, and meaningful than anything you could have possibly conferred on me. You crazy bitch.

“Yeah, great, fabulous. Nice hair, by the way.”

Caril preened before her daughter like a schoolgirl.

“You like it? *Really*? They don’t allow me to do my roots in here, it’s a real bummer. Your hair is nice too. Very...*punky*.”

“Punky B., that’s me.”

“So Rachel...are you...*you know*...” The older woman made a horizontal “V” with her fingers and bent them so they looked like fangs. Rache grinned, spite licking the corners of her eyes.

“What...you mean a *lesbian*?”

At the word “lesbian” several inmates in booths cocked their heads.

*** **

“Well, this chat’s been *fun*, Mom, but the ‘sands of time’ and all that. Anyway. I have a question. You seem to know some stuff about me – don’t know

how you'd know, since I never write, I never call, and I don't believe I'm Googleable. So. I'm just wondering if you had somebody...*spy* on me, that's all. I'm pretty private – you know me, Mom, always a pretty queer fish, always have been, always will be. I get *weird* knowing that people invade my privacy. So I need to know. If you hired anybody. And where they might be located. So I can talk to them.”

*** **

“November Spawned A Monster” by Morrissey started playing, and it had been like forever since Tara and Alex had heard it, especially on commercial radio. So it was quite the little occasion.

They were lying down, heads almost touching, upon Alex's king-size bed – a monstrous, lumpy thing donated to him by his mother that felt so old and creaky that Tara wondered if the boy himself had been conceived on it. The bed took up most of the space in the small room, giving him barely enough clearance to use the built-in closets that faced it. In an attempt to liven up the surroundings, which were covered in a depressing dander-covered dark wood-panelling, Alex had strung red, green and white Christmas lights along the headboard, snaking up the roof, and cascading down the closet doors; in addition, the mouldings and frame of the one window were painted a faded gold. The room was dark but for the little twinkling lights, some of which blinked on and off, and the two roommates were pleasingly drunk, a jug of Julio and Gallo between them. There was no sorrowful or celebratory impetus for the drinking – just ennui on a Friday night.

For the longest time after Tara had the dream about Molly and “Friday is a good day to die” (which she so foolishly recorded and thus preserved from the arms of sweet blessed Lethe), the witch met each Friday with a degree of apprehension. But weeks turned into months, Kinky Witter was almost a memory to just about everybody (except for The Captain, who lined up a number of lucrative licensing deals in Japan including a variety show that showcased a

troupe of butch female wrestlers in Kinky drag), and she figured sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and dreams merely the stinky poop-smelling landfill of the human psyche. Indeed, after the Witter affair, it seemed as if nothing really *happened* anymore – no strife, no intrigue, no adventure. No chaos. *Could I stand it*, Tara wondered, brushing off some wine that beaded up on the white paint of her oversized black Marilyn Manson T-shirt. *Could I actually deal with some frigging peace for a change?* Not that the witch enjoyed chaos – no. But it *did* seem to follow her around – and in a larger sense, chaos seemed to naturally follow any life based and supported on income generated from spurious means. To this end, Tara had begun to formulate plans for the eventual extrication of herself from the magick-for-hire racket--though surprisingly Alex was none too keen on the idea, surprising because Alex was usually keen on everything Tara did. “How will we *live?*,” Alex would ask, in a blink of an eye transforming from his usual engaging Hobbitian self to a man of sudden maturity and plans for the future. *How will we live indeed*, Tara mused – *and what’s all this talk about a future?* The witch was so close to him on the bed, she could smell the cleanliness of him, had a magnified view of the thick blond stubble that began to grow all over his cheeks and chin – *what* future, what, with *him*? He was a homosexual male! There never had been and never would be any fucking at all! And then perhaps they could co-exist as brother and sister just like in some fucked up Poe tale with Tara starring in the Vincent Price role...growing old, and no fucking? It just wasn’t a very attractive end to their lives, it wasn’t too goddamn progressive. Where did they go from this point? *Future?*

And yet –

Wasn’t Alexander Platt just the last friend she had in the entire world? I mean, she had the Invisible College, but she didn’t know them *that* well...and Mal, well, he did seem to hate her little bit, so...

But *Alex*. Good ol’ Alex. The only one who ever understood her, ever encouraged her. The Frick to her Frack. Buddies ‘till the end.

I mean...who else could the witch listen to Morrissey with?

Future.

I'm a fucked-up alcoholic witch of very few morals and a tenuous belief in a benevolent God, Tara reminded herself, sitting up in the bed and unscrewing the cap off the wine jug. *I'm also apparently a "magickal contaminant."* *S'mystery the ol' boy hasn't by now got clipped by a karmic missile aimed at my head.* She turned and looked at her roommate, his tiny, compact frame, how he rested his little hand on his slightly rounded belly, a cute lil' hedgehog with doe-eyes and a pale blue Old Navy sweatshirt. Sweet-boy. Sweetie-boy.

"When's the last time you got *laid*, Alex?"

Pity, sympathy, and people discussing me...

"I *should* probably date more."

"You hardly date at *all*. What's wrong, Alex – is it *me*?"

"...no."

Tara made a silly face and began tickling Alex in the ribs, his body curling into itself like a beetle and his high-pitched laughter...

"No really, *is* it me? Are you secretly in *love* with me, Alex? Have I turned back the tide of your man-on-man fantasies by virtue of my good looks and sparkling personality? Will the secret fantasy of every fag-hag finally be brought into reality in this very Williamsburg shitty rental? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?"

Alex bunched up his pink face in a bashful smile that was his non-committal way of saying "no," his inherent cuteness as a buffer. And it was no surprise to Tara, and no let-down – though it was during the beginning, even though it was pretty damn plain what Alex was when they first started living together, no illusions. And speaking of no illusions – he wouldn't even fuck her when she did the Guy glamour, said it made him feel all "squicky." What was the biggest obstacle, Tara often wondered: her gender, her looks, or her personality?

"That's cool," Tara said, pausing to hold the jug up to her lips and drink down that watered-down, slightly sweet vine-juice. "Though you could *lie* to me every once in a while. It'd give me some *adventure*, even though that adventure'd be as fake as hell. I could make do with some fake adventure for awhile, some mental masturbation – because mental masturbation, at least *that* can't kill you."

The witch sat up a little further in the bed, and as she did so her hair brushed up against some sort of paper-like thing on the headboard. She frowned and looked behind her to see what it was.

“‘Perfect Abs Schedule’?” she said quizzically, reading off the index card she just plucked off. Alex softly patted his stomach with his pink hand.

“Yeah...I just want to tighten up a bit.”

“You look fine.”

“I only look ‘clothed’ fine. I need to look ‘naked’ fine.”

“I’m sure you look ‘naked’ fine. In fact, I’ve *seen* you naked a couple of times, and you look fine.”

Alex looked up at her and rubbed her bare knee playfully.

“Are you secretly in love with me, Tara?”

“I’m in love with *abstracts*...not people, per se.”

“Were you *ever* in love?”

Tara stared at the index card, its words blurring out, remembering...

“I used to be in love with *life*.”

*** **

Molly Griep carefully laid out the grid of index cards on the library table, no one card that much more or less distant from any other. This was before the Change, before she became a Goth and kept roots in jars with people’s names on them. She wore a forest-green tie-dye oversized T-shirt with a Celtic pattern printed on it in black, and her short legs--a little chunkier back then – clad in a pair of blue jeans that were crisp and unfaded and folded-over twice at the ankle. Her coarse blond hair was pulled back into two braided ropes at either side of her head; sometimes as she worked she would idly roll one or the other up in a ball, Princess Leia-like. Burnt-orange freckles shone clear on her fair skin, the young woman having not taken to makeup yet or the “miracle” of concealers and powder. And the round, wire-rimmed glasses that rested on the bridge of her button-nose made her look strangely, superficially older than her years, like

Shirley Temple with white hair. Next to her by the table was Tara Amadeo, her long busty frame obscured with a formless red sweatshirt, and the black slacks that she wore too short and revealing the twin sins of her white socks and unshaved calves beneath. Unlike the spectacles Molly wore, there wasn't even the saving grace of eccentricity about the huge plain glasses that hovered over most of Tara's face, the only kind of glasses fully covered by medical plans. Clutched in her hands was an oversized sketch pad, and she watched in wonder and a slight bit of intimidation as the mass of index cards grew, crowding out their bagged lunches to the borders of the large oak table.

"H-how *big* is this story going to be, Mol?" Tara sheepishly asked, her mind thinking back in shame to the pitifully few sketches she managed to do last night, and how very long they took.

"Pretty big," Molly said matter-of-factly, arranging another card on the table and displacing two in the process. "It *has* to be. It's a *big* story."

"But – are we going to have *time* to do all of this? I mean...for me to *draw*??"

"Don't be *silly*, Tara," the blond woman replied, never looking up from the cards. "We have all the time in the world to finish this book – our *whole lives* are in front of us."

Tara had an image of herself as a stooped-over old lady, a gaggle of kitties around her ankles--still working on the comic, still having problems with drawing hands...

"And it's about *vampires*, you say?"

"*Basically*." The blond woman sniffed self-importantly. "Of course, like every great work of fantasy, there are *Higher Meanings* about the piece that transcend the fantastic. *Eternal* qualities."

"But I mean...I'm going to have to draw vampires – a *lot* of them, right? I'm just wondering because then maybe I was thinking about maybe you know getting some reference material. S-so I, you know, draw them right."

"I'm glad you mentioned that, I almost forgot..."

Molly put down her cards and started digging in her green Jansport,

digging until she pulled out several looseleaf papers neatly stapled with a mini-stapler in the perfectly purposefully dogeared corner. Written on it in Molly's perfect, circular cursive, in green ink, was an exhaustive list of vampire-related books and movies, all in chronological order by date. Tara took the list with her left hand, still clutching her sketch pad to her chest with her right; her brown eyes widened in their tinted, oversized lenses.

"Have you really *seen* all of these?"

"Working on it," Molly replied, turning back to her index cards.

"Isn't it all kind of...*creepy*, reading and looking at so much of this stuff, after a while?"

"To the contrary - I've always had a *fascination* with vampires, ever since I was a kid." Molly looked up from her cards and into the space in front of her, remembering with a fond smile on her face. "In fact, when I was just a little girl, I had an accident in the playground, and my teeth were broken and there was all this blood. And I tasted it – and it was this very distinctive taste, and then I thought, 'this is what it must be like to be a vampire.' And that really had an influence on me."

Tara looked down and picked at the spine of her sketchpad with her thumb.

"It's just that you've never really *mentioned* vampires before, I mean...that's all."

"*What*, do I have to share my whole *life* with you?!" Molly snapped, suddenly turning around and facing the brunette, blue eyes blazing from behind her gentle antiquarian spectacles.

"*Mol-lee*...I'm not trying to say *anything*," Tara replied, flinching away from her temperamental companion, almost holding her sketch pad in front of her face. "Gosh! Never mind. Sorry. I was just wondering what all those cards meant, that's all I was really saying..."

Molly's countenance suddenly cleared up and she gestured to her work on the table proudly. "Well, it's a story-map...to keep track of everything. This particular bunch of characters really are a very busy group, full of little

intrigues...

“Wow, so it’s like you need a *scorecard*.”

“*Exactly*, Tara. I was always somewhat partial to Dickens...and *Rice*, of course.”

“Yeah...I’ve always been a big fan of the X-Men, myself...”

Then they saw him...

Him...

The cute Goth boy that worked at the Kennedy University library.

He was tall and fey and had olive-toned skin taken as pale as it could go. His thick black hair burst straw-like from his head, falling in delicate waves that constantly brushed against his eyes, prompting him to continuously flip them up with an affected jerk of his head. He was always wearing black – that day it was a spandex t-shirt graced with a silver skull-and-cross-bones pendant – and on those rare, special moments when Molly’d see him outside he’d be wearing his cracked leather biker jacket with the painting of a cobra encircling a clutch of roses on the back. His lanky but supple behind and package were lovingly surrounded by boxy 50’s-style jeans that were snug at the torso and cut off just above his worn black leather biker boots. His eyes were *strange* – slightly narrowed, as if originating from a more exotic heritage than his looks at first glance led on – and ringed with darkness. Dangling from one ear was a tiny, obscure symbol that Molly never quite figured out, though later she would say she was sure it was a pentagram, and that the boy as indeed some sort of warlock. He never really had a conversation with the girls, but was exceedingly polite, if a little mumble-mouthed, on the few occasions he did say something. Molly pictured him being a troubled soul, a heavy-metal Heathcliff wandering upon the lonely, fog-strewn moors. Further, she saw a strong resemblance between him and the star of her favorite movie at the moment, *The Sweet Hereafter*--and thought it was definitely more than coincidence.

Molly was utterly, crazily, in love with him.

Tara was in love with *ideas*, abstractions...though ever since she met Molly, and became introduced to Molly’s rich, textured, optimistic world, she

began to expand her horizons and actually enjoy something more than mere thinking and dreaming. With the comic book project – and the lessons her friend was giving her in nature religions--the timid but tall young lady felt the first stirrings of a sense of empowerment.

“I’d really like to wrap my hands around that ass,” Molly whispered to Tara behind the back of her hand.

*** **

“*Ah*-lex,” Tara called out in complacency, into the light-stuttered darkness.

“I’m right here.”

“Alex, I think I’m a magickal contaminant.”

“Aw, heck,” Alex answered, “that’s just crazy.”

“That’s the last thing Molly said to me – *one* of the last things, anyway – before she–“

Alex squeezed her left knee.

“Let’s not. You know? Let’s not. You’ll *upset* yourself.”

“Did I ever show you the comic books? That me and Molly did? The vampire comics?”

“You’ve mentioned them a lot.”

“But I’ve never *showed* you.” Tara’s voice became serious, as serious as a drunken witch wearing only white panties and a Marilyn Manson T-shirt could be. “I keep them, right along with the grimoires, pressed between their leaves...I’ve never shown them you because I guess I’m kind of *scared* of them...sounds funny, I know, with all the things I handle every day that I should be scared of, if I had half a brain in my head. But those books, it bothers me to even open them, like I can’t even *look* at them head-on...all the work we poured into them, all our dreams and neuroses, all our battles fought and won and preserved on the pages... You know, if you want to talk about *haunted*...or just plain evil. *Dark magick*, to be sure, it was inlaid in every line she wrote and every line I drew.”

Tara unscrewed the cap off the jug that rested between her long legs, too

wasted on watery wine to even complete the task of lifting that heavy gauche container, just sat there smelling the bitter alcohol, that smell that could have come from hundreds of random, useless nights. Alex's breathing was slow and steady and made a slight whistle as it went; Tara always felt that you could have told time by it, or at the least be simply comforted that the world was really all right (even if you really knew it wasn't). She continued speaking, not even knowing or particularly caring if her roommate comprehended anything she said; she waved her arms around animatedly as she spoke, making points to some invisible thing--perhaps Molly, perhaps her own mind or sanity.

"It was a *spell*, is what it was – those books. We didn't even have time to finish the last issues proper, we just ran a drawing here and there with the block of text. But *finishing it*, like the end of a race – like the perfect bookend to our friendship, and to the period of time in my life when I became who I became. But it was a spell, most definitely. I thought Luna Park was where we fucked it all to hell, but the *books*...they were like a quiet, unassuming little magickal bomb. And now Roy tells me that I have to kill Rache..." The witch turned to Alex and spoke emphatically: "...and I'm not inclined to do it! *I'm just not going to do it!*"

"You shouldn't have to."

"I *shouldn't!*" She pointed to her chest – or more accurately, the center of Marilyn Manson's white forehead. "It's just not *me*, what I'm about! I want *out*, Alex...I want out. The Nine are just looking for a fall-guy, a patsy, and I'm not going to do it. I want out. *That's* why I have to stop the magick." Her voice lowered scarcely above a whisper, almost apologetically. "That's why I have to stop the *Business*. Do you understand?"

"But how will we *live*?" Alex asked guilelessly, squeezing her knee again with his small hand.

"We'll get jobs. We'll just get jobs."

"It's not that easy, Tara," the small blond man answered evenly.

"Having The Nine ask you to be their personal hit-woman isn't easy *either*, Alex." Tara lifted the jug and placed it carefully on her roommate's stomach.

"Feeling like you're damned somehow or that something somewhere is out to get

you for some thousand crimes you've committed isn't fun, either."

She pulled herself out of the large bed, which felt unnatural for her tired, stoned body to do, and found herself in the small space between the wall and the mattress. She paced the narrow perimeter around the bed, almost one foot directly in front of the other. She wobbled at the window and leaned back unsteadily against the glass, trying to fold her arms casual-like but sort of forgetting how. The little twinkling Christmas lights partially lit up her tall frame against the backdrop of night and sad old brick buildings. Alex remained where he was, a warm, soft bundle of man with a half-drunk Julio and Gallo resting on his mid-section.

"But maybe that's just the way you *are*, Tara." It was strange, his voice sounded to her so far away, like she was really out of the window and it was closed glass before her. It also bore an unsettling resemblance to a Peanuts kid's monologue. "You're a witch."

"But maybe I'm *not* a witch, Alex...don't you see? To say it's some inborn thing...I don't know, I don't entirely buy it. *Molly* just wanted me to believe all that...for her own...*fucked-up* reasons, delusions, whatever."

"My mother used to tell me that it tempts fate to try to pull out of your station in life. If something works...just leave it alone. Because what if it turns out even worse? That's what she used to tell me."

"But was your Mom *happy*?"

"Well...eventually. And she had health insurance, every day of her life."

"Nah, I need some *spiritual insurance*, Alex. I need a shamanic enema, right up there." She looked away and out the window. In the distance, on the street, a homeless person, gender indeterminate under layers of shabby clothing and long, matted hair, slowly pushed its shopping cart laden with burdens down the middle of the empty blacktop. An ooky feeling travelled up her spine, like when you feel a bug walking on your skin but it turns out to be only a fallen hair...like she had seen this movie before.

*** **

Malcolm Dust had almost finished unpacking all the boxes UPS dropped off so indelicately in the middle of his store – yep, more bondage equipment, this time several cases of straightjackets. He had only a few days ago drilled a hole in the ceiling and hung a straitjacketed mannequin by its heels from an eyelet. He really hated playing up to those with more than simply a love of old-time magic and Harry Houdini in mind when they charged handcuffs to their Discover Cards, but he needed *income*, dammit. And who was he, a Luciferian and card-carrying Thelemite – whose motto was “do what thou wilt and leave me the hell alone”--to judge the imaginative sex of others? At least they were *having* sex, albeit strapped to trapeezes.

Amongst the mess of bubblewrap, packing peanuts, and cardboard there remained one moderately-sized box that he had overlooked. Instead of being brown like the rest of them, this box was *white*, with a strange-looking invoice encased in plastic glued to its side. It was addressed plainly to:

Malcolm Dust

He took out his athame, which he was profanely utilizing (every warlock worth his salt knew that you did all the mundane work with the *bolline*, not the athame) for the task of cutting the boxes open, and ran it carefully along the margins of the lid, piercing the clear cellophane tape. Inside the box were some excelsior and foam padding...and another box, identical to the first right down to the invoice. Only the writing on the invoice was apparently in some other language that Mal couldn't quite put his finger on.

“*Sonufabitch*,” he muttered thoughtfully under his breath, examining the invoice closely.

Enochian? Perhaps the writing was of the language of the Angels. But then again...maybe it was just from Qatar, or some place like that. *Cheap fucking farmed-out foreign products...* He shrugged and cut open the box with his athame.

Inside was another, smaller box, with an invoice in yet another bizarre alphabet.

Malcolm's mouth drew deep and down at the corners as he contemplated the situation. It was starting to be obvious...this was some sort of *hex*, some sort of blasphemous motherfucking Lovecraftian bullshit motherfucking hex! He bet dollars to donuts that inside the box he would find yet another. And he did. And he did. And he did.

All told, there were 13 boxes in all – 13, a nice fucking motherfucking number. *How cute*, Malcolm thought, his face flushing red, his breathing shallow, and sweat pooling on his belly.

What did it all MEAN?, he desperately wondered to the gods, looking in disbelief at the little city of white boxes that sat on his floor. Probably poisonous fucking air in them--or maybe not even so literal, more likely some devious intricate black magick spell the likes of which he might not find in all his many grimoires and instruction manuals. It absolutely *killed* him that he fell for it, that someone sneaked the box onto his premises in the first place, and that he really opened, and touched, and contemplated something so damn...*fucking*...diabolically...puerile!

It was a goddamn *violation*, is what it was.

He suddenly stepped/hopped back from the opened boxes, bumping right into the head and torso of the straitjacketed mannequin, which made him jump again.

Damn fool rotten punk joke!

He dropped to his knees on the floor and feverishly replaced every cursed box into every other one, until it was all neat in one tidy little package – then he ran downstairs to his bathroom, removed his shower curtain and peeled off his rubber bath mat, dropped the box of boxes in, and set it on fire.

*** **

Tara never specifically articulated to Alex that she was discontinuing the

magick at a certain date, or even if it really was going to happen at all – and Alex in turn never articulated that he believed such a time was immanent or that he was particularly upset, despite his few scattered whines, about the witch's change in heart. Nevertheless, the petite blond had been spending an inordinate amount of time out that week, after his usual schedule of waking at noon and watching Nickelodeon until the grown-up shows started. This left Tara – who, sans her occult activities both personal and fiscal, hadn't the slightest idea what to do with her life--home alone. And once the novelty of the freedom to have unlimited waltzes with her vibrator waned, the whole situation did leave her in a somewhat ponderous mood.

Was Alex angry at her? *My God*, how could he possibly be? First off, he just wasn't the *type*--to be mad, I mean. He was always quite agreeable, as has been mentioned before. Further – he hadn't he slightest *right* to be angry! Tara had given him a free ride for years – all he had to do was wipe the spittle off her chin and ask her how her day went. Then again, maybe Tara's prodding regarding her roommate's DOA sex-life had an effect on him – and wasn't that, as Martha Stewart would say, *a good thing*? Wasn't it *wonderful* that Alex was breaking out of his self-imposed exile from Guy Street and pursuing some ass? Isn't that what Friend Tara wanted – for them both to be happy and well-adjusted?

Fuck.

The witch, clad in an old pink bra and a pilled leopard-print pair of lounge pants, sat antsy at the edge of the living room couch, hunched over as if her bones hurt, the remote control clutched in her hand. In front of her were a half-eaten bowl of soup that had started to congeal and the spotty remains of a Louisiana Crunch cake that lay desolate in its carton. She decided to forgo the wine until it hit 10 – at which time she and Vine would have a “party,” just like the three-dimensional people did. It was Friday Night, after all, the traditional day of proletarian frolic – except to the unemployed, of course, to which days of the week had little to no meaning. Tara licked the tip of her right index finger and began soaking up and eating the remnants of the cake that rested atop its grey

circular tray.

For all her big talk to Alex, the truth was that she could hardly picture it. Her bad self with a legitimate job. The whole process seemed so – *insurmountable*, dense, arcane. And what, even if she managed by some miracle to secure something decent, then she wasn't to use the magick? Malcolm's words haunted her mind – without her occult defenses, she'd be nothing but viper-meal, a grubling. But wasn't that the *point* – that she would just learn to deal with it, deal with the usurpers and bastards of the world like every other non-damned human being did? And that maybe by doing so, she could be *redeemed*–

Tara frowned. This whole line of philosophizing, including her misgivings regarding the magick-for-hire racket, all presupposed a God – God singular, not plural as in the obscenely powerful Haughty Ones who really couldn't give a shit as long as things were beautiful and interesting and they were fed. But what if she actually followed through with her “redemptive” plans only to find out that indeed the world was God-less – and that all her good intentions got were obscurity and a kick in the teeth? What if the Raches of the world, by “virtue” of their amorality and singleminded devotion to their own self-interest, were the winners in life, the victors in Darwin's schema whose ultimate prize was either to pass their DNA along or leave tread-marks in the backs of their victims or both?

It felt odd to Tara to be spending so many nights Alexless like this – it was almost like some invisible line had been crossed, crossed in a fashion that would brook no return –

It felt like she fucked it up somehow, this good thing she had going, and that the world of the gods, the world where creatures like the Vampire ruled, would neither forgive or forget.

Tara flicked the channels manically with her thumbnail, inconsolable in her boredom. Finally, she stopped at what had become for her a camp favorite over the last couple of months – the Rudolph S. White Blood of the Lamb Hour. The velvet Reverend was in mid-spiel, before a backdrop of cheesy red theater-style curtains, a couple of baroque golden vases of flowers to the left, and to the right

an old-school plaster statue of Jesus with his arms stretched out searchingly before him like Bela Lugosi as the Monster in *Frankenstein* meets the Wolfman. The set had a spare, amateur, high-school production quality about it, and looked like it was shot on a cheap hand-held video-camera, the picture occasionally trembling or focusing out; but with the passionate antics of Rev. White it probably hardly mattered to his devotees. He was a tall, wiry man with high cheekbones and a thick shock of black, pomaded hair, and looked and sounded like Tommy Lee Jones via James Brown via Billy Sunday. His lanky frame, accented by big, bony joints, was draped in a black suit of rich material with wide lapels and a vaguely retro-hipster cut to it – the garment would not have looked out-of-place with long sweeping weeper cuffs hanging about his oversized, expressive hands. And to talk of *expression*--with his deep-set, black-pupiled eyes and fleshy lips perpetually bent in a plaintive Grecian mask, the man hopping to-and-fro across the stage with a white leather Bible in his right hand resembled nothing less than a Goya painting brought to life.

That ol' boy sure is a pisser.

“This is *Satan’s* kingdom – not ours! With every acre we lease and swimming-pool we install, we invest in the real estate of the Adversary! That’s right – Lucifer and Associates! The tragedy of Mr. 9-to-5, Mr. 9-to-5 driving – *what* – one or two or three hours in his nice tasteful car to work, his thoughts a cobweb of anxieties, plans, schemes, wordly attachments...does he even think for *five minutes* about *Godddddd*?? Listening to his self-improvement tapes on his cassette deck, perhaps he’s going to learn French or German or Jap-an-ese so’s he can get that higher paying job or just show-up the neighbors or go to one of those Godless countries for a week’s worth of snapshots and snowglobes – but does he even take *five minutes* of his commute to reflect and show gratitude to He who created him from dust??”

Apparently this was the audience-participation part of the show because a tinny, unsynchronized “*Nooooohohooooohohooooo...*” came from off stage.

“Of *course* not! Why *should* he? He’s given himself body and immortal soul to the fiefdom of *Satan*! In Satan’s fiefdom there is no talk of *Godddd* – quite

the opposite, quite the opposite. If you speak of God in the halls of Business you're likely to be *sanctioned*, labeled a 'Jesus Freak' and a kook...to even *mention* a belief in an immortal soul, or of the efficacy of prayer, of the existence of an eternal structure of ethics beyond that which the Godless world of desire and commerce dictate – is to open oneself to ridicule and scorn. Sometimes people come up and ask me, they say 'Reverend White, you're always crowin' about this world being Satan's Kingdom – how do you know, how do you know for *sure*?'” The man raised his right hand up in the air, waving the white book within his spatulate fingers. “Firstly, of course I know because the BIBLE...tells me so. But if you need more proof, just look out your window and just....just *look* at it...and I'm not talkin' necessarily about the obvious sinning – the child porn-ography and the terrorism and so forth – but look to your *boardrooms*, people! Look to the individuals who shape the very automobiles and chairs and living spaces in which you sit, who design your soft-drink containers and produce your TV shows! How many devote at least five minutes of their day in contemplation and appreciation of the *Lord* that *created* them, and the Lord that *shed blood* for them? How many even *believe* in the Lord? How many have sold their souls to the fiefdom of the Adversary and never looked back? How many have committed or condoned acts they knew that was wrong just so they can get a little more *ahead*, get a little more power and security in their lives? This life is *short*, my brothers and sisters – but Eternity is *longggggg*, long, long, long...” He licked his lips (dry from the oration) furiously. “I'm talking *Forever*, people, I'm talking no sick days, no vacation days, no 'personal' days – *forever*! And this sheath of...vegetable...matter we must carry on our bones, this flesh will putrify and turn black and unrecognizable and unlookable, and fall away, and fall away and turn back to the dust from which it came, fall away along with everything else you see around you, fall away with every object so familiar, fall away with every material thing on the face of the blue-green Earth, even the Pharaoh's pyramids, even your White House, your Taj Mahal, your Las Vegas, your Vatican City, your Franklin Mint collection of Fabrege Eggs, the vegetable flesh of your beloved nieces and nephews and grandchildren and the family dog too, every library,

every archive, every record, every file, every collection, every museum, every landmark, every nuclear warhead, every DaVinci painting – *all of it* – it will all pass away, but our souls and our trust and our seat in the kingdom of God will remain!”

Then the Reverend – who by this time was sweating profusely into the thick black material of his suit - unexpectedly walked off camera, only to return in about 30 (long) seconds with a bottle of water. Before he resumed speaking he tugged at the collar of his shirt and poured some of the water down the gap against his neck; then he poured some more water in the palm of his right hand (the Bible having disappeared with him off-stage) and splashed his face with it, prompting him to gasp in relief before continuing.

“You know...you see so many shows on TV now and books and whatnot about *investing*. ‘How do I invest my money properly, most advantageously?’ ‘What stocks are a *safe bet*?’ Who stole my cheese, rich dad poor dad, be money-wise, and all that. But the real question we should all be asking ourselves is – how do I invest in my *soul*, in my coming reunion with the living body of the Savior? The currency is your *soul*, and you have two banks to choose from – *two* of them – God or the Devil. It’s that simple. Now, people come up to me and say, ‘Reverend White, it just ain’t that simple!’ And I’m here to tell you, brothers and sisters – yes, it’s *that* simple. We live in a world, in an *epoch*, of multiplicity, of unlimited choices, of super-shopping complexes boasting foods from every continent and baseball hats and beach towels and Hush Puppies in every color imaginable, just ask for it and if they don’t have it they’ll order it special. The other day I was visiting my cousin’s family and they had this special type of cable television, had about 700 channels. 700 channels. And I was sitting there, looking at the TV Guide, at the schedule – which is crammed into this tiny tiny print to fit all of it, you can hardly read it – and I was just overwhelmed. *Overwhelmed*. We live in a world of multiplicity and very often we get overwhelmed by the sheer number of things, the number of choices we can make. And then the question of good versus evil comes up, and this multiplicity has confused us so much, so completely racked our brains and dazzled our

minds, that we get overwhelmed and we feel like, 'how can we possibly categorize things into good and evil?' There are so many options in the material world available to us, isn't *morality* the same? Is it a true or false test or multiple choice? And then, if you're of a theological bent like myself, you take out your sacred books and compare notes and make arguments and interpret phrases in several different languages and the rest. But there are some things that are BASIC. Basic. Universal. Universal, coded in your DNA. Pre-verbal. Things that are the emanations of a healthy consciousness. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto to you.' Do not kill. Do not cheat. Feed the poor. Help the helpless. It's *that* simple, and it's beyond debate. And it's something, Mr. and Ms. 9-to-5, that you ought take five minutes out of your day and think about.

"Because the time is coming soon when all that is in this Kingdom of Satan will pass away. But before that, the Adversary in the flesh – not merely in his emanations, but in his red, fire-kissed flesh – will walk this Earth down your Main Street. And he will not merely walk but *strut* – strut, because he will feel as if he had *won*, finally beaten He who created him. And it will be a sad time for the Good, but one which we must all own up to our complicity in, no matter how righteous a life we have led – because with every sin we have committed in our lives, we contributed to the ascension of the Adversary, drop by drop, coin by coin.

"And in those horrible days to come--those days that are coming I guarantee you – there will be a harbinger of Lucifer, a facilitator, the *grease* if you will...and this harbinger will throw open the gates to Hell and pave the way for Satan's triumphant march down Main Street, down the center of the world, in much pageantry and music and celebration, trod-trod-trodding down the backs of the people, and yet those people will call out and say: 'Lucifer! But he is so *beautiful* –"

"And in those days guaranteed to transpire, family will go against family, wife will turn against husband, son will turn against father, and that with the greatest potential for good will be corrupted – that with the greatest potential to touch the face of God will be brought *low*, dragged muddy through the black

heart-flesh of the Adversary –

“So save yourself now! Before it’s too late! Save yourself through the blood of the Christ! Save yourself! Save yourself!”

The rollicking but ominous organ music started to play, and Tara excitedly knew, as the Reverend tilted his head back and started to do that epileptic, spasmodic thing he did with his gangly limbs, that it was just about...*blood time!*

“Save yourself! Save yourself! Bathe in it! Bathe in it!”

What appeared to be blood, thick and deep red, started to pour on top of the Reverend – first a couple of tentative drops, then a steady flow as like a faucet. He relished the stuff, greeting with a smile its fall on his closed eyes and his nose and his entire face, awash and near unrecognisable in the stuff.

“Bathe in it! Bathe in all the lovely blood! Praise Christ! Praise Christ! He bled for you! He bled for you! He suffered for you! He died for you! His blood! Praise it! Praise (glub) it! Purify yourself within the fountain of his wounds!”

The witch absolutely loved the Grand Guignol element of this particular segment of the show – the gore, the carnival music, the trembling body of the Reverend, his frenzied exhortations and the way sometimes even the camera shook in the middle of it – it was at the same time both utterly absurd and pulse-raising, and she got into the groove and stood on top of the couch and started dancing and saying,

“All the blood! Bathe in it! Bathe in it! Save yourself! Hot-tub! Get into the hot-tub!” She spun around, throwing back her head, *“Hot-tub – get into it, nice and hot! Hot-tub! Gotta get into the hot-tub! Well, well, welllll...”*

Then her phone rang.

*** **

“Mmmnnnnniss Ammmnnnnnadeo! A good evennnnnning to you!”

Tara remained standing on the couch, tilting her head and resting it on her left shoulder.

“Armand?”

“Mmmme and the boys arrre at the pastery shop, annnd we were wondering if you would grace us with your presence...”

“Well...I wasn’t planning on going out tonight,” she answered, squinting at the green LCD reading on the cable box. “It’s a little later than you guys usually hold the College meetings, isn’t it? Or have you all decided to shed the upright button-downed seekers-of-knowledge bit and get down and *boogie*?”

“Tonnnnnight is *special*, Tarrrrra – we are celebrrrrating the discoverrrry of *hard proof* that the paranormmmal exists!”

“Shit, *really*? Laughing-stock of the journalism world no more, eh, guys?” The witch made a quick, casual sniff of her right armpit. “But uh, like I said, I really wasn’t planning on going out tonight...I’m just not *prepared*, you know? By the time I get decent and then shlep all the way over there...*Armand*? Are you there?”

She heard a shuffling sound on the phone, and then the excited, almost breathless voice of Burton Waxman, who apparently bogarted the receiver.

“C’mon, Tara – just splash some water on your face and get over here! You don’t have to worry about how you look with US! We’re your *buds*! C’mon! We can’t *wait* to show you what we found!”

“What, what is this thing you found, Burt? UFO parts that fell out of the sky? Chupacabra poop? What?”

“That’s why ya gotta *come*, Tara! Come over! The management here is keeping the place open late – just for us!”

“(Sigh) *Burt*...”

“C’mon, it’ll be no fun if you don’t come! We’re all *rooting* for you: *Ta-ra! Ta-ra! Ta-ra!*”

“(Sigh) *You guys*...”

Those loveable schmagolies.

*** **

The witch took the most austere and pragmatic of showers, pulled her hair back in a ponytail, put on a wrinkled white T-shirt and a pair of jeans, and threw a full-length black leather trenchcoat on to cover it all up with. A brief jaunt on the “L”, its automated, chrome-gleaming Kawasaki cars running constant station and time information on an electronic display hanging from the aisle ceiling. Tara hated going out on days she didn’t plan on going out on. She realized that without her magick “house-calls” she really didn’t get out of her apartment very much at all, and she wondered why that was – sloth, misanthropy, or even agoraphobia? *Oh why would I possibly be agoraphobic*, she grumbled in annoyance. *I’m a honking powerful witch. I’m powerful, man*, she thought as the train pulled into the curb of the station and she felt an instinctive relief at the trip, as seemingly harmless as it was, being over. *I’m powerful. I’m a powerful witch. I shouldn’t even need to travel by train – to suffer the long waits, the stalled cars, and that damned rolling interminable noise of transit. I should – I should just fly. If I could fly. I never tried flying. Flying might actually take up a lot of magickal energy. But I could practice and build up a tolerance. I’m a powerful witch, man. I know I’m giving up my powers and all to live a life of grace but it just bears mentioning one more time, because it’s a fact – I’m powerful. Yeah. Powerful. Hulk smash. Hulk strongest of all there is.*

Despite the lateness of the evening the station and black streets outside was still swimming with people, though they thinned out once she passed Sixth and turned left down the side-street that would take her to the pastry shop. Most of the block was taken up by stores that had already locked up for the night, and the witch found herself the only soul on the sidewalk, the *clickclickclick* of her heels reverberating in her ears, mixing strangely with the Kylie Minogue song “Can’t Get You Out Of My Head” that was getting louder as she approached. She almost passed her destination because its gates were down over the store window and partially drawn over the door. *I guess this is a private function of the distinguished Invisible College of Paranormal Investigations and Free-Thinkers – just like when they shut down FAO for Jacko to visit.*

She ducked slightly under the gate and pushed the glass door open,

seeing Burton and Jeremy in the distance sitting at their usual spot, Burton looking animated as he saw her, waving. The music was louder now, pumped in through the stereo system. *The boys really are celebrating tonight*, the witch thought, stepping into the store. She looked to her left at the glass counter that boasted its chocolate-and-cream treasures under lights and behind the mist generated by its refrigeration system. There was nobody at the counter, just a few small statues of the saints and Mary, some dollar bills taped to the wall, an overloaded flystrip, an Italian calendar with a picture of the Pope on it blessing some children, and what at first Tara thought was a red streamer or paper dragon like in the Chinese restaurants, a decoration. Upon closer examination it was a heavy vertical smear of blood.

The witch swung around as she heard the gate to the door pull down. Armand.

His hair in the front was almost completely white, as if someone had dipped it into a vat of paint; only a few black streaks remained, but the effect was startling, as if he had aged 20 years – only his face was far from decrepit. He was pale, yes, but with a violent flush of red around the mouth and fat cheeks, and the witch immediately knew all too well the cause.

“Tara, you will forgive us if we started *eatinnnnng* before your arrival,” he said, in clear sight a pair of glittering alabaster fangs tainted crimson.

“That’s...okay,” she answered slowly, unable to process the incongruent images before her that had forced their way like a SWAT team past her senses into her mind. “Like you said on the phone...you were already *having* the party....”

“But now we’re *really* going to party,” said Burton, who the witch turned around to see was only several feet away from her, Jeremy close behind.

Bullshit!, Tara’s brain screamed, the delayed reaction to the apparent set-up quickly falling into adreno-neural overload.

This was the last thing – the very last fucking thing – she had ever contemplated happening. But after years of monster-chasing wasn’t something going to befall at least one of the Curious Trio? Didn’t she always *warn* them about that? Didn’t she always warn them??

D'uh nope, I never warned them. Fuck.

But all the sympathy that would have flowed out of her body for these unfortunate men – good, decent men who she had known and enjoyed the company of – were conquered almost spontaneously by the looks in their red-rimmed eyes – gazes that held, despite their recognition of her form and remembrance of her name, no memory of their friendship, no sentiment regarding her person, no empathy regarding her immediate situation. Those eyes – they were glass marbles with a taint of hunger and desire infused within the centers of those transparent shells. To see their fangs, that was superfluous to the sea-change in their eyes, which told all, which were like doors slamming shut on one perception of them and a house-of-horrors chute thrown wide open on another--

And it was undoubtedly Armand Guiffre, the man who appeared to be the most noble and gentle of the College, who had undergone the biggest transformation. Tara wouldn't have been surprised if he had gotten bitten and liberally dosed with the vampiric venom first, only to pass on slightly weaker infusions to his companions. He was, quite plainly, a completely different person. Besides his white hair he seemed to have grown several inches in height and gotten slightly wider, giving him the basic shape of a refrigerator. And despite his words to Tara – so polite, so formal, as they always were – the expression on his face, a dead, stone evil, belied the real truth, the real destiny of poor Mr. Giuffre, poltergeist and crop-circle expert, diabetic, hapless part-time private investigator, underpaid columnist for a Z-grade tabloid, and now undead killing machine.

And what disturbed Tara the most, what really reached deep into a being that had considered itself inured to the grotesque, to the Horror, jaded, capable of looking at the seven demons of hell with an ironic eye and a pithy statement at the tip of its tongue – what disturbed her the most was that he, along with the two others near her, was regarding her with a countenance of lust. Not simply blood-lust, but the tacit designation of the witch as the female in the room. She didn't know why this bothered her so much, why she felt so sick to the stomach, so befouled – it went beyond the violation of the “safe-zone” she had experienced

around them, that cozy feeling of being “one of the guys” and surrounded by a handful of “big brothers.” It had completely tainted and near-obliterated her memories of their company that she could have taken comfort in. It made her question whether or not there were hidden emotions of this nature that they had held regarding her all this time – that one or more of them were just humoring her, pretending to be a friend but secretly harboring those carnal intentions towards her and maybe even deeply resenting her, resenting the way she’d wear a tight shirt with those goddamn insolent titties just hanging out there like she was some hot shit, like she was asking for it. And then it made her question her own naïveté, her own stupidity in letting down her guard and trusting someone, her stupidity in thinking that heterosexual men and women could actually have these friendships and not have that sexual river running underground, ready to strike at any moment like a serpent, ready to burst out in a volcano of resentment – hell, even in the book “IT” all the boys ended up gang-banging Beverly. Stephen King tried to position it as a coming-of-age ritual designed to shore up power against the Evil – how true the existence of the tension, of the fantasy, and what prosaic bullshit the explanation. Bullshit. Bullshit.

Or maybe not so bullshit, or so inconsequential, or so not-going-to-happen, as the three men got closer to her, only going slow and not attacking all at once because of their knowledge of her powers, their efficient vampire minds thinking overtime, noting every fraction of movement she made, trying to anticipate any magicks she might use, to gauge a good time to fuck her and tear her throat out.

“Aw c’mon, Tara, don’t look like that, don’t *be* like that,” Burton said, getting closer, “Aren’t you at least a *little* happy for us? We finally *found* it – found the Secret. The Power. Found out beyond any doubt that true magick exists, that this world wasn’t nearly as boring as we feared it was. I mean, you used to tell us stories – and show us *tricks* (chortle) – but that was just getting it second-hand. After all these years of watching it in the movies and on TV, it’s finally actually happened to *us*! We’re *stars*! We have *super-powers*! Just like you...only there are more of *us* than there are of *you*...”

Tara's head jerked back to face Armand as soon as she felt his icy offal-smelling breath on her face...the corpulent vampire was now only a foot or so away, the stink of freshly-butchered meat coming off of him, coming off of newly-dead flesh that wouldn't achieve its full aroma of corruption for a good several weeks – but the maturation of his vampirism wasn't the issue, he was infected enough to do what his eyes told they would do. The witch's powers froze in the asphixiating atmosphere of the matter at hand, stuck in the labyrinth of her own horrified thoughts...her long legs felt light, felt as if they would collapse from under her...

Armand put his clammy, meaty hand on her neck, a gesture that seemed at the same time affectionate, sexual, and the prelude to murder.

"Nnnno nnneed to be *frightennned*, Tara, you knnnnow mmmmmneeee..."

The witch attempted to pull the hand off – a struggle as it had possessed a great strength.

"I *knew* Armand Giuffre - he was my friend. *You*, on the other hand...." Her eyes suddenly turned red. "...motherfucker, I never knew *you* before!"

Her vision and her mind was altered – cut-short – by swathes of red, and she lost consciousness as they closed in, the last thing she remembered before the Sleep being how strange it felt to have her lips snap into that deep, vicious smile –

*** **

Poundpoundpound--

"I never knew you! I never knew you!"

Poundpoundpound--

When Tara regained her senses she found herself literally beating Armand's head in with a gore-stained fist, brains and bone-chips flying, his features wiped away and his face resembling a pie with a baseball thrown into it. He was propped up on a table, his back leaning against the wall, the ass-end of a broken mop deep in his thick chest, the witch standing over his body, hitting,

hitting, hitting--

Poundpoundpound--

“Bastard! You fucking bastard! I never knew you!”

Poundpoundpound--

She was unsure as to how much time had actually elapsed, but the stereo was playing “Careless Whisper” and towards the back of the store with a wooden chair-leg through his heart--the chair still attached to it--lay the body of Burton Waxman. Jeremy was at the door, frantically trying to roll the gate up. And Tara kept--

Poundpoundpound--

“Youfuckingmotherfuckingfuckingbastardmotherfuckershithfacecocksucker!!!”

The witch switched to both hands:

POUNDPOUNDPOUNDPOUNDPOUND--

“FUCKERFUCKRFUCKERFUCKERCOCKSUCKERFUCKERFUCKER!!!”

And then she stopped, feeling the vampire eyes of Jeremy staring at her from the doorway, the newly vampiric young man standing sheepishly on the threshold of the big wide world, his posture slightly bent, his face a pathetic contradiction of the faintest of human remains and excitement and wonder at the novelty and the breadth of the unlife that awaited him, the prospect of this recent and most sweet desire now imprinted into his DNA--the craving for claret--being fulfilled again and again and again. He shed no tears for his fallen comrades, held no regret for attacking Tara or helping kill the store manager or the custodian. There was only the most abstract of emotion generated by this man in what used to be his heart but was now a redundant hunk of flesh as alive as broken watch--and that emotion was a generalized, faint sense of closure, of *change*.

As for the witch, on sighting Jeremy, her first impulse was to pluck his spleen out and impale him. It was more than revenge-motivation, and certainly had nothing to do with protecting herself, because in the past ten minutes she

had more than proved who as the strongest creature in that store. No, there was something about her that was on auto-pilot, some Force that had knocked out her old skin and had so terribly dispatched Armand and Burton. She pulled her hands out of the wreckage of her former friend's face, shocking herself by the length of her fingers, fingers steeped in brown-red splatter, fingers clawlike and terminating in what looked more like dragon's talons than anything the a human would possess. To leap across the room and end this young vampire's "life"--that would be the easy, natural thing to do. Indeed--it might even be *enjoyable*, scintillating. But the desire stemmed from a deeper, darker plane than merely ridding the world of an Evil, it seemed to exist as an end to itself, a dance of the crackling blackest of magicks. And unlike Jeremy, Tara remembered what her former friend was, what they all were, and felt bad enough, felt sick to death enough about it, but the new element inside her, the one that distorted her hands into scythes and made her eyes blaze scarlet, it was jumping in her dermis, it was setting off atomic bombs within--

"**GET OUT**," she warned Jeremy through clenched teeth, and he spared no time running out into the night.

She looked back down at her hands in fascination and horror, held them out in front of her like specimens. Obviously some sort of magickal reaction to the stress and danger, she thought, even as the darkness in her head was still dancing, darkness like the snap and snarl of the three-headed dog at the gate to Hades. But it was fading out, slow and steady, to be replaced by her speechless disgust--rising nausea--as she looked down at the surface of her black trenchcoat and saw it slick with filth, like a butcher's apron, disgust and shock being replaced with the requisite emotional distance necessary for one to process and move past such an event and actually be helpful rather than be dragged down with it.

Well, at least I let Jeremy live, gave him mercy.

She took a pale blue terrycloth rag that had been sitting on the counter, still damp from its dead owner's use, and placed it over what was left of Armand's head.

Yeah, I'm a regular Mother Teresa.

She walked over to Burton's body, stepping over broken plates and splintered furniture along the way. She resisted the urge to sit for a moment and rest on that chair that was sticking upright out of his chest. His glasses were a couple of feet away, all four lenses of it smashed. The man looked so peaceful, lying there, and perhaps also a little surprised, a little disappointed. Burton and his need to touch the infinite, to transcend his "puny" mortal abilities--the need the entire Invisible College shared... Well, they touched it.

Tara exited the store, pulling the grate down behind her. Several blocks away, she took off the trenchcoat, rolled it into a ball, and dumped it into a trash bin.

The College was officially closed.

*** **

Alex wasn't home when Tara came back. A little red light flashed on the answering machine, and the witch, tired and numb, hit the "play" button with her now-human but still bloody finger. She had scrubbed her hands raw back at the pastry shop but it was not enough to clean away all the residue around and inside her fingernails and caught in the creases and folds of her palm and joints. The whirr of the tape inside the machine rewinding itself, and then, instead of what she expected--Alex checking in to let her know he was going to be late and not to worry--she got:

"Yeah, this *Dust*--pick up. Pick up. Yeah, well, just letting you know, I got your little *present*, Tara, and I'm fucking not amused. You *hear* me? NOT FUCKING AMUSED! You think you're soooo clever, you goddamn cunty punk, but if I ever--EVER--get another prank like this from you I'm going to make you wish you were never born--am I coming in clear? LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE! And stay the fuck away from my store...just stay, stay the hell away from me. *Okay?! I mean it, don't ever fucking pull anything like this again. Just stay away from me...even if you see me on the street, just stay the hell away. Just*

stay away. Yeah. *Bye.*”

Tara had no idea what that fruitbat was talking about, and didn't really care-- but it was the last thing she needed to close out such a patently, colossally *shite* night. She pulled off her clothes and walked like a zombie into the bathroom, filling up the tub with warm water and pouring shampoo into it as it filled, creating a bubble-bath effect. Strangely, she chose to wear a black-and-red striped bathing cap, even though bits of the undead gore of the Invisible College dotted her hair. She neatly tucked every strand into the cap, stepped into the tub, and turned on the waterproof Sports Illustrated radio that was mounted beside her on the wall. As some neo-folk tune about pot warbled on a university station she let her head fall on one side and practiced how it looked and felt like to be dead.

*** **

About a half-an-hour later her roommate came home. He entered the bathroom, looking flush-faced not because he was ashamed to see Tara in the tub--they were past such formalities, and besides the bubbles covered most of her up--but because he had obviously been drinking quite a bit, though he didn't seem silly or tipsy. He asked if he could take a quick leak and then did so, and then Tara told him that they needed to talk, and he sat beside the tub, little reddened face resting atop the porcelain rim and fingers peeking out, clutching like Killroy. And the witch shut off the radio and recounted to Alex everything that happened that night, that she had to put two of the Invisible College “down” and that they had all turned into vampires, and that it was really horrible and they almost killed her and then Mal called with some abusive bullshit and said he never wanted to see her ever again for some retarded reason he never specified, and that she was really tired of magick and tired of everything and didn't want to do the business anymore and felt it was the best thing for both of them to get real jobs, and maybe the best thing was for her to move out, what did he think about all that? And Alex said,

“I agree with you,” said it not in anger or pity but as straightforward as a

casting director, as unsentimental as taxes., and then he inquired as to when she was thinking about moving because he just met someone who was coincidentally looking for a place, and Tara, still trafficking in blunted emotional affect, gave him a time frame, which was very soon because the cold, detached look in his eye, that look in his eye as if she was a stranger, had ended one life for her and began another as of yet undesigned, it was a look that made her want to leave this place (now so immediately alien) as soon as possible.

And that business been settled, Alex excused himself because he was very tired and needed to go to bed, and Tara said “goodnight” and “please close the door on your way out,” and after he was gone she stared at the bubbles on the surface of the now-tepid water, and let her vision cloud over with wet as she let herself cry and buried her face in her hands and cried silently, cursing the whole damn day, cursing everything, and blaming herself for wanting a change in her life. *All I wanted was to do the right thing, but everything I do turns to shit.* Alex, Armand, Burton, Jeremy, Kinky, Molly, and even fruitbat Malcolm--all turned to shit. It felt as if everybody was turning on the witch at the same time, and she hated the whole damn day, hated that feeling of the door closing and nothing on the other side to catch her.

And then she tried to reassure herself--

Tried to reassure herself that she really didn't need them, didn't need them because she really was a very powerful witch, yes she was, a very powerful witch. *Yes, I'm so powerful. I'm soooo powerful. Yes. I am. I'm a very powerful witch.*

She rubbed the bottom of her red nose with her fingers, sniffing as she did so.

Hulk the strongest there is.

*** **

The African-American lady--that Guinan-looking busybody pain in the ass with the frigging shells in her hair--folded her arms on the table and inhaled

slowly, trying to remain patient with Molly. This was a really stubborn one, and though the older woman had seen many many persons go through the gate and end up sitting across from her, this smallish blond with the owl-eyes was one of the most intractable, one of the most advanced cases of delusions on a grand scale she had ever seen. Indeed--the young woman seemed so immersed in a world of her own, a bustling, highly-detailed, densely populated universe, that it was no surprise that she demonstrated no loneliness, no desire to get better.

But she had to be made to see--

"Molly. You're not going to get any more tapioca pudding unless you tell me why you are here. This was the deal we made."

The blond curled herself in a ball on the chair, her feet up and her knees to her chin, eyes of spite behind stringy hair.

"I made no deals with you. You're making all these deals, but it's with nobody."

"Why are you here, Molly?"

"*Why* am I here? Is it because you all are a bunch of jackasses who have no idea what's going on? That have no idea what is to follow? What is as we speak falling into place? Pretty soon it won't matter. Pretty soon everything here and you and me and everything won't matter, because the Harbinger is alive and walking and soon it won't matter anymore. I don't care what happens to this planet. It deserves everything it gets. And God, and all these twinkling little niceties they taught us in school, all of it--they all *failed* me, they all proved to be just a pack of lies to keep me in my place. Well soon it won't matter and that's that and I'm beyond caring about it."

"But if we can just come to...a *consensus* as to why you are here, if you can admit this to yourself...we might be able to talk about it and prevent all those bad things from happening."

Molly didn't answer her, just wrapped her arms around her legs, lacing her fingers, and stared at a place beyond the woman, beyond the plain white room. And the older woman, frustrated, resting her chin in her hand, browsed impatiently through the thick manilla folder on her desk, the one labeled "Griep,

Molly” with an older school photo from before the Change stapled to its cover, and for a few minutes the only sound in that room was the rustle of those papers, and then the woman found it, found something--

She held up a crudely-drawn black-and-white comic book titled “Fools and Vampires” with a crude picture of a female vampire biting another female victim on its cover.

At the sight of it, Molly snapped out of her catatonia, began to get agitated, and eventually had to be dragged out of the room in a straitjacket.

WISHBONES AND TOENAILS

Mia never really understood why her vampirism had taken so long to completely manifest, but felt in retrospect that the delay only helped produce a better vampire. Unlike those unlucky un-souls who completed their turning within the space of a few days or a week at the most, she had the chance to think about it for a good long while--to ruminate over the peculiar circumstance, its ramifications, and the incremental changes that were taking place in her mind and body. And while at the beginning she went through quite acute periods of fear, guilt, and self-doubt, now that she had finally crossed the threshold, it was pretty damn awesome.

The day that her human body finally died was a joyous occasion. It was several hours after she returned home from her "field trip" to the City, the massive infusion of blood via Gabriel's heart temporarily sustaining her for the journey. She had been so sick on that subway platform...like she was going to die, like most of her consciousness was being subsumed in a fever. And the blood brought her back--brought her back to life. But was it really to life, life as it is commonly understood--circadian rhythms, trips to the supermarket, blankets spread at the beach, dental work, cell phones, play dates, etc. And was it really *her* she was being brought back to? No, she had arrived at a foreign destination, but one that she owned, like a strange new island that she discovered. And that night she felt so wired in the house, the home that all at once felt so big and so strangling and so alien, feeling like she would burst out of her skin, so excited, so excited and manic that all she could do was run up and down the stairs, from the first floor up to the attic and from the attic all the way down to the basement. And in the basement there was a cooling sensation, and a pull, a comfort that the upper floors did not provide.

The basement had a rudimentary living quarters built into it, a project which Frank spearheaded and subsequently abandoned, constructed under the theory that they might need overflow space from all those family get-togethers

and reunions, and then with the kids maybe they'd turn it into the "game room"--but the young couple hardly had any guests sleep over, their isolation beginning long before Mia's turning. And the child question was, by this time, quite moot. Nevertheless, the skeleton of a room remained, a hodgepodge of unloved furniture, a mini-fridge, a 36-inch television that didn't work, and a closet-sized bathroom. Best of all, it was dark, and Mia found the dark and the underground to be *good*, and the above and light and airy, like those goddamn picture-windows in the living room, to be accusatory. To be honest, she had the rather irrational urge to bury herself in the backyard under the azaleas and sleep for several weeks, and probably would have done so if not for her husband.

And did she still love Frank? Weren't such sentimentalities cast off with the mortal coil? Or was it even sentiment that kept her there? Was it sheer habit--and was habit what prevented the majority of vampires from simply collapsing into brainless anarchy, like the worst of beasts, creatures without identities or pretensions to humanity? Gabriel had told her stories of vampires who had made such a break with the human framework, how they chose to live in the woods or deep within subterranean pockets beneath the cities--how they were so estranged from their former "civilized" natures that they could barely speak, minds blank but for instinct. Members from Gabriel's clan would go out in packs and hunt these renegades down, fearing that their indiscriminate feedings, with no thought of discretion, might attract the attention of law enforcement and get them all in trouble.

And so was that why she really stayed on Shore's End, the same reason those vampires hunted their own--to keep up appearances? Yes, perhaps that and sheer habit--and how much more different was that rationale from the reasons so many couples in Shore's End stayed together?

That night when her human body died, she was sitting on the musty, uncovered futon in the basement, her head rolled back, staring at the porous, water-stained ceiling panels and the ugly grey industrial fan and the exposed pipes, marveling how her eyesight seemed so sharp, so much more focused, how the panels and the pipes and the fan's blades seemed so close to her face

but only if she wished them to be. *How different will I be now*, she wondered in awe, *what fabulous things will I be able to do with my body?* And as she thought this, she felt a slight discomfort, a swelling in her abdomen, and very soon it became a crushing gaseous pressure, and then it had become a gastro-intestinal emergency, and the woman ran into the tiny bathroom and did her business, doubling over in the sensation of burning and sheer volume of passage. And Mia didn't know yet that her body was dying, she assumed it was just a colossal case of indigestion perhaps set off from the ingestion of Gabriel's blood--vampire blood which normally wasn't the ideal fluid for other vampires to imbibe. But the passing of her waste seemed to go on for quite a long time, and the stench was somewhere beyond mere fecal catastrophe, and she just wanted to be done with it and she wiped without even looking, and she flushed without even looking and she was a few feet away from the bathroom when she heard a strained gurgle and the sound of splashing and she turned around and the toilet was overflowing gore.

*** **

Mia curled up in a fetal position on a stained orange beanbag chair at the far corner of the basement, under a framed print of a sad ballerina clown selling flowers. She tried to come to grips with the fact that she just shat out what looked to be a kidney, some length of intestine, and several sponge-like masses of tissue. She had clogged up the toilet with her own vitals. There was a rather dreadful finality to that. And while the act itself didn't hurt any more than a bad case of diarrhea, flu-like symptoms started to rack her body, a tingling heat, a watery mouth, and above all, an overwhelming nausea. *My God*--in all her life, she never had such an intense desire to vomit, a desire stemming not so much from mere illness and discomfort but from a desire, a *will*, a will to satisfaction and relief. And though the vomit wouldn't come she *wished* it, she desperately wished it as she writhed on the chair in a sweat, the stark image of the mess in the bathroom--all over the floor, even splashed on the walls--unable to leave her

mind.

And she regarded it all with disgust.

And she regarded it all with an anticipation.

Tears spilled down her face and she laughed, she laughed because it was finally over, it was all over, all this time of living at the margins, never sure of what she was, and now it was all so clear--

There was a purpose, finally, for all the suffering, for all the feeling of inadequacy, for all the betrayal--it all made *sense* now, it was all leading to this moment. A purpose now, an assurance, a Way, a blueprint--

A pink acidic stream burped out of her mouth, followed by a rapid chugging sound in her chest, pushing past her throat, liquid fire, and she was on the floor, on all fours, letting it come out, encouraging the vileness of her mortality to exit her mouth in a torrent of bile and blood. And as she vomited, her raw vocal cords groaned out a noise that almost resembled a howl, but it was joyous, it was as primal and incomprehensible and real as a baby's scream, and she didn't believe in God anymore but she prayed that this was the last aspect of the Birth, and now she could go about her existence--such as it was--with no more steps backward. She had her whole eternity to look forward to.

*** **

Boris was never a very intelligent or talented human being, and depended on the grace and gullibility of others to earn his bread and keep him at the level of financial security to which he was accustomed and felt he wholeheartedly deserved. And so he whored out his body and subjugated his dignity to well-heeled others. Being a reasonably attractive biracial bisexual male with a compact, well-toned body and eye-catching platinum hair buzz-cut into a pointed hairline just like Doc Savage or Harry Osborn (take your pick), such a lifespan was quite doable. However, because he understood that people were in general untrustworthy, inconstant, and generally wretched, he was always plotting and scheming and hedging his bets, ready to jump what he perceived to be a sinking

ship or screw over its captain at a moment's notice. Yes, he thought himself clever--though admittedly not clever enough to subsist on his own merits rather than to resort to clinging and leeching and fawning and rimming others in order that he might have a comfortable place to live, the most fashionable of clothes, and a steady supply of coke. When he was turned--something that he actually sought out and willingly submitted to--he hoped that the vampirism would change all that, provide him with the power he needed to break out on his own and even himself assume the position of power that he so burningly envied all those years of being somebody else's rent boy.

But nothing changed, other than that the stakes (if you will excuse the pun) were higher and that he was able to bite and feed off of and victimize others as a temporary release from his sycophantic existence.

On this particular day he and a much taller brunette with long hair and a wrestler's body named Ivan were on either side of a petite female vampire, the men nipping at her earlobes and drooling over her neck and breasts, building up to what would be another night of threesome activity. The female vampire's hair was jet-black and cut in a severe bob that made her look like a flapper, and she had a small, pointed nose and startling ice-blue eyes; on her body was a red satin slip that lovingly hugged her modest breasts and shapely bum. Her name was Pris Baxter, and she was the leader of Clan Generra, one of the most powerful clans in the City. And Boris was not her *childe*, but that didn't stop him from being one of her closest thralls anyway and besides, she was too progressive a vampire to fall into that Ricean bullshit. Pris believed that bonds and kinship were formed not by lines of infection but by actions and demonstrated loyalties, and she worked Boris *hard*. Not only was he the little vampire's sex toy--and, to his annoyance, that meant also being Ivan's as well--but he was on call for the most piddling of tasks including picking up her dry cleaning, driving out to New Jersey for her plasma contact, and--

Pris pushed Boris's face away dismissively with her palm and reached for the cell phone on the table that had just beeped. Ivan was still ravishing her snow-white neck and shoulder as she spoke briefly on the phone and nodded.

Then her ice-blue eyes fell upon the blonde.

"It's Gabriel downstairs--Boris, will you be a *dear* and stand by the front door to let him in? Thanks."

Great, and I'm sure that big hunk of lunchmeat will be macking all over you in my absence--

"Sure thing, Pris," Boris answered, adding, "but I don't understand why he never brings his *key*..."

"Oh, you know *Gabriel*," Pris said as she guided Ivan's hand under her slip.

Boris grunted, pulled himself off the bed, and wrapped a blue bathrobe over his black briefs. *Yeah, I know Gabriel--that flaky little creep.*

The blonde vampire grumpily stalked through the loft, his bare feet leaving vague impressions on the \$10,000 eggshell-color rug from Sweden. The space was decorated in a minimalist style that emphasized clean lines and the contrast between black and white, an elegant, almost sterile layout that was broken up by only be a few well-selected well-placed cultural items such as the trio of African masks above the black leather sectional and the antique axe, complete with residual green moss, that hung over the mantelpiece of the faux fireplace.

Boris sneered as a faint knocking sounded on the other side of the front door. Heh. Gabriel. Weird little fucker, even for a vampire. The word was, he was serially fucking and draining older women all over Manhattan. For all Pris's self-righteous speeches about how vampires should live in peace with humans, haemo-alternatives, and all that crap, she turned a blind eye to her own brother's dalliances. Also, he could tell the boy just plain didn't like him, which was fine with him, because he wasn't the one stuck with a boy's dick for infinity.

Gabriel knocked weakly again.

Boris opened the door to find Pris's little brother leaning in fatigue against the doorframe, his left hand under his shirt, clutching his chest. His sandy-blond hair was more disheveled than usual, his delicate, angel's face looked drawn, and one eyelid was lower than the other.

"Call my sister," he said in a small voice, stumbling into the loft.

Boris enjoyed seeing a rival in fucked-up shape. It was just a fact that he enjoyed this. It was fun to speculate as to what happened, and if possible what permanent effects it might have resulted in, preferably death. If Pris wasn't there he might have let the little shit die on the \$10,000 rug and even help him along on his way. But Pris *was* there--and so he did what he usually did, which was what he was told.

Boris took a deep breath.

"Prisssss....your brother wants you..."

In seconds the short, slender woman had emerged from her bedroom and was at the boy's side, her lightning-quick vampire movements rendering her travel virtually instantaneous and seamless. Gabriel could barely hold his head up he was so faint, and his lips trembled; Pris grasped him by the shoulders and lightly shook him in concern.

"Gabriel," she spit out, her ice-blue eyes burning in their sockets. "What happened to you?"

The boy pulled his shirt up and showed his sister the large, raw fang marks in the center of his chest. The trauma had caused rings of red to echo out through his white skin from the bloodless wound, the epicenter bruised an ugly purple-black.

"I had to do it....she was going to die..."

Pris's red lips crumpled in mortification.

"Have you fucking lost your mind?! You let someone bite your heart? Your *heart?! Who?! 'Her' who?!*"

Gabriel squirmed under her grip, squinting and looking away.

"This girl I'm seeing," he slurred, still weak from the blood loss, "Not a big deal..."

"This 'girl' who?!"

"A girl!"

"Don't fuck around with me, Gabe," she screamed in desperation, digging her fingers into his undead flesh, "tell me!!!"

The boy pulled away from her grip in annoyance and pain, half-walking

half-tripping to a nearby white loveseat that was covered in shearling. He continued averting his heavy-lidded eyes from her but was seriously pissed off.

“I’m like *dying* here and all I get from you is the 3rd degree!” he shouted, putting his hand back under his shirt in order to smooth the soreness of his chest. “You’ve got Ivan and Boris, I deserve something too! I’m *bored*! What do you want me to do?! I’m getting old and I need someone I can count on! You’re always busy with them and with Generra and with your company and I just need someone there for *me*! God-*dammit* you can be a bitch sometimes, Pris!”

By now Ivan was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, clad in a magenta bathrobe that barely fit his massive shoulders. Boris couldn’t tell what the goateed Fabio-bastard was thinking about all this, but he, for one, was eating it up. He enjoyed the strife and always hoped it would end in some sort of extremity, preferably a death. Nobody talked like that to Pris...nobody except that useless flake brother. He found the sentimentality repulsive and abhorrent--and indeed , in terms of vampire culture, it was.

Pris stood before Gabriel speechless, as if she had been slapped; she was motionless except for a slight tremor of her head, a tremor as if she was trying to process this impertinence. Then her face softened and she tentatively, almost timidly, sat beside her brother.

“You know Gabriel, I’m only *concerned* for you,” she said with a shaky smile. “I don’t want you to get *hurt*, that’s all. What if somebody--some *woman*--is trying to get close to me and Generra through you?”

“Pris,” he answered, passively letting his sister lift up his shirt to examine the damage, “she isn’t like that, she doesn’t know anything about all this...except what I told her. She doesn’t come from here”

“But Gaby, what you tell her has an impact on all of us...on *Generra*,” Gabriel scowled.

“I don’t *care* about Generra.”

“You care about *me*, don’t you?” She chuckled his chin gently. “About us?”

“Yeah, sure, but...”

“So what did you do,” his sister continued as she extended the soft side of

her bare arm to him, a riot of dark blue veins clearly visible under pale, almost translucent skin, “this ‘girl’ needed blood and you gave it to her? From your heart?”

“She was dying,” he said mechanically, focusing all his attention on the meal that was held up to his mouth, that he hungrily, instinctually clenched in his jaws and sunk his fangs into.

“So you so *generously* gave of yourself to her (that’s right, drink it up)--only to come back here for another withdrawal?”

But her brother was too engrossed at the task at hand to answer.

The petite female vampire brushed back tenderly a few hairs out of her brother’s eyes, watching him calmly as he sucked from her arm as if it was a mango. Then she leaned in and lovingly wiped away some sweat and soot from his forehead with her long, almost prehensile tongue. By now Ivan had disappeared back into the bedroom and soundlessly closed the door; and Boris certainly had neither the stomach or interest to stay and watch further. He got dressed and went to Rache’s.

*** **

Frank arrived home only to find the front door unlocked and hear thumping noises coming from the basement. He was not one to get all paranoid and bring his gun into the matter--rather, he never used to be that way. But Frank, over the last year or so, had become a really stressed-out guy.

He snuck lightly down the basement steps, his Magnum in his right hand. From the fourth step he could see Mia down below, scrubbing at the carpet next to the orange beanbag chair.

“Frank? I *know* it’s you,” she called out; her husband couldn’t tell whether she meant it as a greeting or as some sort of vague threat.

“Honey?” he replied, hesitantly putting his gun back in its holster. As he proceeded down the steps he saw the big, wet, discolored mark on the carpet, his wife kneeling in the middle of it, her body facing away from him, scrubbing

furiously, a bucket at her side. By the time he had reached the basement proper the smell really started to hit him, this deep, soupy smell chased by the overwhelming odor of ammonia. The narrow bathroom was gleaming as if it had been recently washed ceiling-to-floor, with what looked like bleach stains on selected parts of the walls and an ominous dark tint to the shallow pool of water at the bottom of the toilet. Resting by the bathroom door was a tied-off half-empty garbage bag.

“Honey?” he repeated, not even realizing he was doing so.

“I threw up,” she said without emotion, continuing to scrub.

“What do you...what do you think it *was*?”

“Bad fish.”

Frank glanced back at the bathroom and the garbage bag.

“You know, maybe you should get this checked out--you could have food-poisoning or some...”

“No. I don’t think so. It won’t be necessary. I’m fine.” She turned around and locked eyes with him; her husband let out a small gasp. Her skin was so pale, so achingly pale, and yet...and yet he couldn’t remember the last time she seemed so...*beautiful*.

She didn’t expect trouble from Frank. Frank was manageable. The whole world seemed so much more manageable, now.

The next day, after Frank went to work, she buried the contents of the black garbage bag--several of her organs and other bits--in the backyard amongst the azaleas. Later that day, while sorting through the mail, she came across an odd letter addressed to her husband from the “Policemen’s Appreciation League” and marked “confidential” on the seal. Frank, as a cop, got many such missives as this but this particular letter struck her as being very...*odd*. It was almost as if she was getting *deja vu*, but just didn’t know why--

Then she recognized it, and immediately, savagely, ripped open the envelope.

The archaic, smeary typeface--

Dear My Bright Sun,

Or should I call you "Stranger?" I do not mean to harass you, for only Lord knows what is going through your life right now for you to have pulled away from me. I hope everything is ok! And if this is an unwelcome intrusion, a message too dangerous to put forth in enemy territory, I deeply apologize in advance. It's just that we had such a good thing going with each other and it seems like a shame-
-nay, perhaps even a sin--to just throw it all away like
that. The bond that we shared doesn't come along often in life, and it is one that I cherish and relive to this very day. And I know that deep down you feel the same way, though obviously your circumstances are more severe than mine.

What should I do? Should I rip open my heart and tell you that--I love you? Is this what it has come down to, to put my feelings on the chopping block like this?? Well,
somebody has to. Somebody has to take the risk, because yes
this relationship is really that important. And I really love you, And I know that this is hard for you--only Lord knows what you've had to deal with in your life, with putting your life in danger every day on the streets and dealing with your mentally ill wife. I think back to Jane Eyre, and poor, noble Mr. Rochester, and how he suffered. And I only want what's best for you--even at the risk of
heartbreak for me.

All I'm asking, however, is that you take a good, hard look deep into your soul and ask yourself what is right--not necessarily what is right in terms of the straightjacket society puts us in, but what is right for
you.

All the best,

My sweet love eternal,

Myra.

PS: My new cell, (347) 555-6600

*** **

A bald, African-American vampire with a Maori tattoo on his face and a Star Trek Voyager T-shirt stood guard at the storefront entrance to the "Sausage Factory," what vamps referred to as Rache's base of operations. Of course, the vampire was not literally on guard like standing at attention with an UZI in his hand--that would have attracted the interest of a cop, though police seemed, through either instinct or rumor, to skip this particular block. No, the bald vamp merely leaned idly against the window of the abandoned butcher's shop, apparently just watching life go by, such as it was. But with Boris's approach his demeanor quickly snapped into that of what he was--footsoldier for Rache's army. He looked dubiously at the tan-skinned platinum blond with the silk aqua-and-yellow two-toned cabana shirt and the ropy gold chain about his neck.

"You got business here, jack? You know where you're at?"

Boris smiled pleasantly at the other vampire and held aloft a red Kipling duffel bag.

"I've got business, yes. With Rache."

The tattooed vampire spat on the sidewalk.

"Rache is busy."

Dipshit, Boris thought acidly. Freak. The whole Caress were a bunch of freaks, Rache headlining as the biggest one of all. But though Boris conceded that he was neither intelligent or talented enough to be one of the Leaders, one of those who rode on Top, he did think himself possessing a certain amount of cleverness and street smarts, and the laws of survival for him dictated that he not box himself in to one group or another, one person or another, based on such a devalued non-entity as the concept of loyalty. And so he just loaded up his bag with containers of concentrated Victorian Allure suntan lotion and did contraband, Rache repaying him in blood and money but more importantly with an alternate

affiliation to cling to, just in case things went a little south with Generra.

And it wasn't just Boris's fear of Pris losing interest in him that propelled him forward in his alliance with Caress. No--there were also the rumblings coming from the Street, from Caress, from even the lone wolves who were unattached and clanless--rumblings that Pris and her fellow clan members, stuck in their ivory towers, trapped in the box of ridiculous clan loyalty, never heard, because they had removed themselves from the Street.

The word was, Rache's ultimate plan was to destroy Generra. Completely.

Just how such a task was to be done, that was the \$64,000 question. The Caress were punks. A lot of them, quite frankly, no better than children. Generra had its claws in business, up to their blood-red arms in money, and an eye to politics to boot. In ten years they might be the Law, to an extent, in the City--be the Law enough to harass and liquidate The Caress, and other vampires they considered undesirable, to the point of extinction. And it was not a baseless paranoid fear on Rache's part, though admittedly she was one prone to baseless paranoid fears. Clan Generra's views on what made an acceptable vampire and what was to be done with the rest (for the good and longevity of the species, of course), was quite clear, through the mouthpiece and mind of Pris Baxter. Vampires like Rache and those of the Caress were just...too...*messy*. Pris's belief was always that vampires would be able to thrive unimpeded by humans only if they operated purposely and carefully under the radar--and The Caress and other freaks, with their anarchic views and counter-cultural affinities, well, they had no sense of style or discretion. And so...

It was either Us or Them. With Boris somewhere in the middle, Kipling bag in tow, waiting...

The platinum vampire shook his bag impatiently in front of the other vampire's face.

"Look, Darth Maul--what I've got in this bag is what's keeping you from going up like a Roman Candle in the midday sun. So unless you want to catch shit from your Fearless Leader I strongly suggest you step the fuck back and let me in. *Comprende?* Or should I say it again to you in *Klingon?*"

The tattooed vampire gave Boris a withering look but dug deep in his baggy jeans to produce a flip-phone, placed a call, and reluctantly let Boris in with an indecipherable mutter under his breath. Boris chuckled to himself at having “gotten over” on another loser. He thoroughly prized the “currency” being a valued snitch for Rache got him. In Pris’s world he was just a *thrall*--but here, at the Sausage Factory, he was the keeper of treasure. It was too bad Rache as a dyke, for if she wasn’t he was sure that he would be up in her snatch and sitting by her side (he sensually ran his hand over the bristle of his close-cropped, textured hair), because he was so *fine*.

The bitch was in good spirits when he arrived, which was scary. He approached her sitting in that old chair the same way he approached all his benefactors, potential or realized--he approached their thrones with reverence, a touch of charm, and the inborn desire to both give them whatever they wanted and scope them out for weakness. He pushed past a couple of wastoid Caress members who had apparently just finished a meal--because that scent was in the air, the scent of rent veins and arteries--licking their fingers complacently. The dark patch on the floor he walked over was the usual “offerings” patch and it was still moist. Fucking animals. They lived like fucking animals. If Generra went down, was *this* was he had to look forward to? The Texas Chainsaw Massacre shack?

And yet simply to survive, to persist and to be amply fed--that was the most important thing.

Rache shifted in her seat and flashed Boris a squinty, unreadable smile, resting her big round head in her hand lazily.

“So Boris...how’s life in the land of the *living*?”

“You know...can’t complain. Then again, I probably *can*.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “You know *Pris*...”

“Poor baby,” she pouted. “You have it tough with that ice-cunt, I know. Keep your chin up.” *Dumb prick*, she thought to herself.

“I’ll try...but sometimes it’s enough to make you turn for the second time!”

“I hear you, brother.” *Dick*. “So what’s in the bag? More *presents* for me?”

A newborn, perhaps? Or do you got the *shit*?"

Boris grinned arrogantly and unzipped the bag. "I've got. The shit. The *Shit*."

Rache strained forward in the chair, holding out a pudgy hand and grasping.

"Hey--*gimmie*," she whined like a spoiled child, stretching and contracting her fingers. "Give it here...come on, gimmie!"

It was hard to tell if Rache was serious or not in her infantilism--with her temperament, any sudden turn of emotion was possible. In fact, his own murder as possible, the one overlooked stone in Boris's entire mega-scheme of a thousand clever plans. He just never figured in his own death in any equation, and such a grievous oversight could have been the result of stupidity but more likely simply because he was still a relatively young vampire, and his sense of his own immortality greatly exaggerated.

The platinum vampire made a motion like he was going to throw the bag at her to catch, but a tight and sudden warning look squeezed out of her blue eyes prompted him to instead walk up to her and gently place it in her lap.

"The shit, huh? This the shit?"

"The shit, dear."

She took out a pink and black container, unscrewed the top, and poured some of the jelly-like beige liquid out into her hand. She sniffed it. A strong fruity scent, as cloying and sweet as bubblegum, and tenacious and pervasive enough to mask undead odor. Perfect. The Shit.

"The shit. Nice. You should have dropped by earlier, we had a nice meal going...just some wishbones and toenails left over, I'm afraid." *Fucken' pencilneck.*

"S'alright. They keep me fed pretty well back at the Silo." *I don't eat leavings, bitch--I'm filet mignon all the way!*

"Yeah, that *vegan diet* Piss Baxter has you Generra on, I don't know...I think it leaves you all pretty weak, if you ask me. Vulnerable. Pretty fucking unnatural, the whole thing."

"I know, I know... But it's what she wants."

"Well, why don't you all get together and coup the cunt? She's just a little fucking mouse--*crush* her. Why is everybody so afraid of that tiny bony twat?!"

Boris made a face.

"They're fucking *loyal*, man--they've got it all *invested* with her."

"Loyal to the *death*, huh?"

"You know something I don't know, Rache?" Boris asked with a playful raise of his brown eyebrows. He loved a good gossip, and almost came from the excitement of finding out some sneaky secret plan of annihilation.

"No, chickie-poo--the question is--*you* know something *I* don't? Hm?" Her thick neck elongated slightly as she craned her head in Boris's direction, looking at him hungrily like a serpent. "What's the latest? *Spill*."

And then Jeremy Hand burst into the room, which was a relief to Boris, who had greatly overstated to Rache his access to and possession of sensitive Generra information, and was trying to ration it out for every visit. Jeremy was wearing the same clothes he wore since the bloody incident at the pastry shop, the same clothes he wore when he was turned--a brown-and-black cotton plaid shirt and a conservative, somewhat stiffly-cut pair of slacks, an ensemble that was patently non-descript but for the amount of dry brown claret spillage.

"Th-the...*the witch!*" he exclaimed, a manic, glassy-eyed look on his Norman Rockwell face.

"What?!" the red-haired vampire snapped, her short, dense body tensing to the point where it almost jumped out the chair. "Slow down! What, *Amadeo?*!"

"Yes, *her*--she killed Armand and Burt...I escaped...I *failed*, Mistress." Jeremy's mouth hung open in an "o" of infinite, hollow despair. "Please forgive me!"

To have that witch still walking around was troubling to Rache, quite annoying. Tara Amadeo was one of only a couple of loose threads left. However, with that screwball skank seeming to be a bigger and more capable threat than she had previously surmised--and the fact that the biggest thread of all, that damned Piss Baxter and her stormtroopers, were hanging over her like a

guillotine blade--she decided to let it slide for now. Besides, she held no disappointment over the news regarding the demise of that fat fuck private investigator or his four-eyed friend--they were both older, lesser specimens and wouldn't have been assets to The Caress anyway. This Jeremy fellow was still pretty dorky, but give him enough kills and have him lose those pants, he'd shape up right nice.

When the nascent vampire was dismissed to another room to partake of those wishbones and toenails, Boris, who upon his slightly pointed ears hearing something approximating the idea of "a great power" needed to know more, needed, asked,

"What...what *witch* was he talking about? Is that for real?"

Rache sucked her teeth and brought her fingertips together.

"*Pcht*, just some witch, that's all. I knew one once. Nutjob skanko. I got a spell, it worked, next page. More fucking trouble than she was worth. I could have done what she did by looking up rituals on the motherfucking Internet."

In the beginning, Rache quite enjoyed retelling her tale of how she strong-armed the witch into giving her power, how the vampire had been "blessed" and was now reaping the benefits. But time and experience taught her that she was to attribute her success to nobody, certainly not to some dumb luck spell--that would make her look weak. Better still to wax the sorceress and be done with it, but time and experience also taught her patience. Patience, in all things...

And one day Generra would be gone.

And one day that skanko witch would be dead.

And one day that dipshit Doc Savage-looking motherfucker would be dead--*dead*--and it wasn't one for her even to bother about.

People like him, so damn *smart*--

Poor lost little lambs, baa baa.

*** **

It was easy for Mia to find out where Myra lived--she merely called the

phone number on the letter, got the full name from the answering machine, then Googled the address. But truth be told, she probably could have held that envelope under her nose for a while and then just tracked her down by scent alone.

Mia was at a loss as to what exactly she should wear to her first (and presumably last) meeting with the mistress of her husband. It was almost as exciting as when she got all dressed up to see Rachel, that day....at least Rachel gave her something, this Remarkable Gift (the vampire held up a teal polyester dress to her face so she could get high looking at the weavings with her newly-minted fully-functional vampire eyes, it looked like a tumultuous evening sky).

What did *Myra* ever give her? Did Myra ever give anything selflessly in her whole life?! No--people like Myra just *took*--took with no regards to the consequences or the victims, just living in her own Me-centered delusional universe. Horrid woman that haunted her dreams faceless, this creature that seemed so fearsome, so menacing, this creature that in the days before the turning Mia felt was laughing at her, encouraging her to suicide. Selfish bitches like Myra Banes who gave no thought or care if the "mentally ill" wife of the man she was fucking was driven to suicide by the shock and shame of the infidelity.

(Mia slid the hangers in her closet back forcefully, trying to decide...)

Now that she was a vampire, she wouldn't have to put up with it anymore. Any of it. Any of those people. Ever again.

*** **

Mia confidently strutted down the sidewalk of a quiet residential street in Flatbush; she had been passing through what was obviously some sort of main shopping drag by the subway, and the men hanging out and drinking in front of the candy stores hooted and whistled as she walked by in her short red miniskirt and tight black jacket. They were the type of guys she wouldn't give the time of day to--frankly, they were the types of guys that gave her agoraphobia--but she felt a queer sense of triumph at their hollers and dirty mutterings, as if every

compliment from a man “proved” to Myra Banes that she, Mia, was the more desirable. It had become so much about her versus Myra, the competition for her husband with this person who until recently she didn’t even know the name of, and when the turning happened, she had forgotten all about it, she was too busy dealing with the many facets of her new existence and then the relationship with Gabriel. But that letter--that damn letter, it brought it all back--it brought it all back! Like a post-traumatic event, playing back, playing back how helpless and unattractive Mia felt, on the bathroom floor of the house she shared with the man--suddenly-stranger, contemplating an overdose, feeling like nobody cared--

The vampire got closer to the address, to the house number, and as she approached it in the remaining minutes of daylight she disarranged her long brown hair with her fingers, smeared her makeup, opened her jacket and tore her white shirt at the collar. She could smell the girl now, getting closer to her, and she entered the building and rang the doorbell--

A pale skinny young woman dressed for a funeral with black wavy hair and a pencil-nose answered the door. Mia had never seen such a specimen dressed in that way in her life, other than in caskets and that one weird girl she met during the field trip that was flirting with Gabriel. It was like the creature had purposely dressed and applied her makeup so she looked depressed and ill and corpse-like. Mia found it so grotesque. And she was so...so *plain-looking*, outside the bizarre outfit. Such tiny breasts, they hardly poked through her black lace shirt. *This*--this was what her husband fucked? It should have comforted her in a way, but it didn’t--it only made her more angry. For whatever this “bond” was that those two shared, that drove all those damn letters and took Frank away from her for so many nights--it was even deeper than mere physical appearance. She was prettier than this creature, but not even the prettiness could make him faithful. It was like there was something so unappealing about Mia, something that prompted Frank to stray, that attractiveness wasn’t even sufficient. This girl, with her clown makeup and death-dress and non-existent tits, won. *This* girl won. And with all her power as a vampire, and how far she had gotten out of the timid mousy shell she used to inhabit--that girl, staring at her, she *won*, and that was a

fact and always would be. Everything that came after this point was just revenge.

Mia's expression turned to one of breathless distress.

"Please, could you let me in please? *Please*?! This *guy*, he was *chasing* me, and he just...he just..." Mia hid her face behind one hand and choked as if she was crying.

Myra, who, when not fucking other women's husbands, was quite the feminist and socially responsible individual, reached out and put her hand on Mia's exposed wrist in concern; the touch burned the vampire.

"Oh my God, of course...of course."

Mia sniffed piteously behind her palm.

"You *mean* it? I can come in?"

"Yes, sure! Come in, come in..."

The creature's decor, though neat and organized almost to the point of obsessive-compulsion, reflected more of her freakish interests. Pictures were on the wall of disturbing people and situations, of monsters and dead people--it totally bewildered Mia that anyone would want to display such horrors where they had breakfast in the morning and where they slept, and seemed to prove to her Myra's inherent deficiency, a nature that was almost evil. *And she called ME mentally ill*, Mia growled to herself. As the vampire sat down on her bed--this bed where no doubt the deed was done, repeatedly--she studied the images, even recognized a couple as supposedly depicting the Undead, what an artist or filmmaker's vision of Mia's own kind would look like. She thought back to her own preconceptions about the Vampire--a few of which borne out, but the majority a pile of rubbish. Most of all, she couldn't conceive of indentifying herself with such baroque, freakish, and oft-disgusting images in any way. She simply *wasn't* those pictures. She simply wasn't. She was Mia. She was *Mia*.

"I'm going to give you a wet towel so you can just cool off, maybe wipe your face," Myra said, heading for her bathroom. Mia got up and stepped over to the young woman's desk, a tall antique black metal typewriter catching her eye, the one that creature used for the letters. Next to it was a stack of typewritten pages, and the cover sheet that read,

“The Un-Romantic Vampire”

*** **

Myra never heard Mia coming for her, never heard her step into the bathroom. She just felt the frigid hand clamp over the back of her neck, another hand sinking deep and holding fast to her long black hair, and the dragging to the toilet bowl.

“W-what?? *What*?! *Stop* it--what are you doing?! *Stop*!!!!”

At first Myra thought it was that phantom attacker, the one the woman had referred to--that he had followed his victim to this apartment and was now going to finish off all witnesses to his crimes--

But the voice she heard as her head was shoved into the water, canceling out her screams as she gasped for air, that voice told her who it really was, though it also told her nothing. If this was a woman, why was her grip so powerfully strong?? And why was she doing this? Women weren’t rapists and killers.

“Drink, drink, drink, my lovely,” Mia cackled, the words of sadism flying out of her mouth surprising her, as if she were channeling them from some other place. “Not good to be on this end, is it? Maybe if you drink it all up, you’ll be able to breathe...”

The young woman yelped and sputtered, waving her arms about her uselessly, trying to grab at her assailant but such motions futile and the failure of which only adding to her panic.

“*Whuh-whuh*-why, why are you (kaff) doing this?! Why??”

The question hit the vampire hard, it bothered her deeply, enraged her for reasons that went beyond all reason, it was something that goosed her brain and set fire to her skin...this question...this question...how dared she ask--

Mia pulled the girl’s head out of the bowl and almost gave her whiplash by turning it around so it and the rest of her faced the vampire’s own.

“*Why*?” the older woman sneered. “*Why*? You have the gall to ask me

why?? Was it that unimportant to you?!"

Myra met Mia's mask of fury with her tear-filled close-set eyes, snot running down her nose and her long, almost lipless mouth crumpling in terror.

"I-I-I don't know...I don't know whuh...what you're talking about. Honestly! I don't--"

The vampire slapped her hard in the face with her powerful hand, sending a stream of blood out her nose and the corner of her mouth.

"Was it that unimportant to you?! Why, with all those *letters* you wrote him, I expected you'd be a little more sentimental..."

"L-letters to who? What are you talking about??"

"*Frank*," Mia shot back, foul-smelling spit flying out of her mouth and hitting the smaller woman in the eyes. "You remember Frank, don't you...your 'bright sun'...the man you FUCKED?!"

But Myra genuinely didn't remember. She didn't remember, and she said so when she wasn't choking on her own mucus and catching her breath. And the young woman's failure to admit her sins only angered the vampire more, the vampire shaking her and shaking her and ordering her to admit it, admit what she did, to admit it or she'd kill her, but Myra didn't do it--Myra couldn't do it, because the witch Tara Amadeo had wiped her mind clean of the memories--and so the vampire killed the creature, savoring the gush of blood that spurt forth from her neck and from her heart, savoring that queerest of looks on the creature's face as she saw those pointed teeth closing in on her, the first time the girl realized that her attacker, her immanent murderer, was a vampire. Myra had always imagined what it was like, all those many years, how it would be--and it was very painful and it hurt so much and she was drowning in her own blood, feeling it flood her windpipe and the oxygen waning like she was strangling, and it just hurt so much and the hurting wouldn't stop until she felt herself die.

IN THE COMPANY OF VAMPIRES

It was certainly a retarded time for Tara to move out, in terms of practicality. She hadn't a place to go, and would be trading temporarily (she hoped temporarily) her shitty rental in Williamsburg for a shitty hotel room *off-off-Broadway*. The bulk of her extensive collection of books and occult accessories, which she was crating up now, would be schlepped to mini-storage; only the most indispensable of ritual items and grimoires would be toted around with her in a trunk. And she hoped she never needed them. It was her intention to go straight, contrition for the deaths of Kinky Witter, Armand, and Burton--and of course there was the little matter of launching that little hate machine named Rache Merrywether.

The boxes...it was overwhelming, crowding, Tara crouched on the floor and looked up at them, was surrounded. And past the boxes--each one neatly printed with the name and address of the mini-storage facility and then a section for her name scrawled in Sharpie block letters--the empty shelves. The barren tables, the bare walls. It was all *her*, she had marched into Alex's life and apartment several years ago and laid tracks and became the entire show. Like a spreading bacteria. And who *was* Alex, anyway? She thought she had known. She thought she had known the members of the Invisible College, too, but at least they had the excuse of being turned into the Undead. Tara, dressed in white floral long-johns that rode the curves of her body, leaned back against a large brown box and contemplated on that Saturday afternoon her impending move--this was her last weekend there. Why didn't he beg her to stay? She always thought he'd beg her to stay. She thought that they were Frick and Frack, Jack and Jill. She thought a *lot* of things.

And then--then how he just lined up some guy he met at the gym to take her room, to pay the rent...how perfectly it all worked out for Alex. She was only sorry that he would have to go out and find a job now--you know, that was unless 'Lex's new roomie wasn't independently wealthy or a *wizard*, or something--

No, she wasn't bitter. All those memories...she was already crating them up.

Tara's vision fixed on a gray-white empty shelf, an outline of phantom books printed on its surface with dirt and the effects of sunlight over the years.

She would find another Frick, another Best Friend, another *compadre*, another family. If the rhythm of her life seemed to dictate that every relationship and affiliation would end in disaster--the flip-side would mean that there was always some new cast of characters waiting in the wings.

Yah, it was dysfunctional, but also queerly comforting.

*** **

Boris had been attacked by a hunter that night as he came back from Rache's, only a few blocks away from the loft. Someone had jumped him from the second floor of an apartment building, leapt from a fire-escape like he was on the fucking WWE and almost rammed a long wooden stick into the tan vampire's chest. At first Boris thought it was either someone from his own clan, that Pris had gotten wise to his relations with The Caress. But the smell of fresh blood told him otherwise, and he cursed his own, uncontrollable jonesing for claret that titillated and excited him at the same time that this bastard was trying to kill him. That blonde Billy Jack motherfucker was strong for a human, and to be bested and almost staked by such--it was goddamn humiliating, is what it was. Thank God for the cops scaring that guy away...they were *delicious*.

*** **

Pris couldn't help but smirk at the pathetic sight before her, of her whore Boris so scuffed and peeled and bruised, a broken rib sticking out of his cabana shirt. She stood there elegant in a silver silk bathrobe embellished in intricately rendered black-and-green hummingbirds hovering over the angled branches of Asian flora, and she put the back of her petite white hand to her lips, demurely

hiding the curl of her red mouth, knowing full well that it was still quite visible, the smirk, and that Boris was at first hurt, insulted, and then upset at her callousness.

“Not--*funny*--“ he muttered under his breath, pushing past her and heading for the bathroom.

“A night of rough sex, Boris?” her voice mockingly but without the benefit of humor tinkled behind him. “I thought you were going to procure a human to devour. I can still smell it on your breath.” She suddenly appeared in the bathroom doorway, her vampire reflexes omitting those inconvenient, plodding steps through the livingroom and down the hallway. “And here I thought you were following the Rules,” she purred as Boris lifted his stained shirt and hesitantly poked at the protruding rib. “But Ivan was telling me *different*.”

At the name of his most immediate and hated rival the vampire almost snarled.

“Yeah, like I’m sure Ivan doesn’t eat Veal all the fucking time.”

Pris frowned and flicked the black chromium light fixture off with a perfectly manicured red-tipped finger. The platinum-haired vampire stifled a groan in his throat. She was suddenly at his ear, close, movement without the inconvenience of walking or time-elapement. “We don’t use Caress-scum words like that in this house, in this clan,” she hissed, all her attempts at lightheartedness fading-fast in the wake of who she was, who she always was. “It almost sounds like you’re keeping their company, what with your eating habits and gutter language.”

Boris bit the inside of his lip--and since he was a vampire, it hurt like hell. Did she really know? Did *Ivan* know? Did he *tell* her? He always wanted to get rid of him--that *bitch*! That fucking shit!

Time to change the subject.

“*Uhm*...Pris. You were telling me about those problems you were having at work? With that Desjardins dude and Bersee? Well...what if you...what mean is...get a *witch*?”

Pris’s black tapered eyebrow cocked up.

“‘Get a witch?’ What the hell are you babbling about?”

“A witch, Pris,” he replied with a roll of his dark eyes. He was attempting to pull out several amber pieces of broken glass that had embedded themselves in his abdomen during the melee. “You know, witchcraft.” (pluck) “Agh!” (pluckpluck) “Arghh! I-I *know* of somebody...”

A witch. Pris had heard of witches, but never actually met one. She could have if she really wanted to, but she never did, for most witches and warlocks were disreputable and not a few complete fakes or lunatics--only *Caress* would stoop so low as to socialize with necromancers and fortune tellers. But times had recently changed, situations had changed, at Dermaco. It was down to either killing or cursing. And killing was too messy, and Pris *hated* messy.

“Can you...put me in touch with this witch?”

Ah Boris had her now--all the vitrol and threat she had displayed only minutes ago were ground away by the turn of the gears in her brain, by her greed and the promise, however vague, of increased power. He carefully placed his forefinger and thumb on another piece of glass and tugged--

(pluck)

“Aigh! W-well, I only have a name, but that’s all you need, really. What say, dear, I get something set up...*tomorrow*...after I rest a little bit, Boris needs his beauty-sleep, you know?”

Pris smiled and nodded, turning away from the tan vampire, lost in her own thoughts regarding the application of sorcery as it related to her current business dilemmas and frustrations.

“Very good, Boris. Tomorrow, then. ‘Night.” She was halfway down the hall when she stopped and called out, “So what exactly happened to you, anyway? Frisky human?”

“You could say that--it was a Hunter.”

“A *Hunter*,” she exclaimed in mortification, her bell-like voice ringing through the apartment, rattling mirrors. “How do you *know*? There haven’t been hunters around here for...for a year or two at least. Maybe you just ran into some *man*, he was more than you could--“

“He had a bag full of stakes, Pris,” Boris answered, resentful for her

insinuation that he was both stupid and a weakling. "They weren't baseball bats."

"Well what--well what did he *look like*, then?"

And at the given description Pris wrapped her arms around her chest as if she had a body that could be affected by cold.

*** **

The hotel room smelt of must but at least it didn't smell of pee or have any pubic hairs on the blankets. It was the most that could be said for the arrangement. Tara lay in the dark, in her street clothes, head propped against a pillow. Across from her was one of those mural-sized mass-produced canvases of abstract art in a pastel frame with chrome piping that really made you want to blow your brains out.

What a mess. No job, expensive-yet-really-depressing moldy hotel room, and the honk and cry of the traffic on Broadway, the fucking clog of trucks and taxis. She tried opening the window to air the place out but the smell of smoke and fuel and the blast of hot air clashing with the air-conditioned staleness quickly prompted her to close it again. She was terribly bored, and the City held no surprises or allure for her so she rarely ventured out for more than to pick up a sandwich or pasta plate at the deli. In such oppressive moments of ennui her thoughts travelled back to the contents of the trunk to the left side of her bed. She would just get impulses to cast spells for no reason, big chaos magick spells full of results and good times. But she remembered the admonitions of Lucy Holloway, and the specter of Rache. And then she recalled the Nine's request, via Roy, for a hit on Rache--requesting it from her as if she was fucking Silvio from the Sopranos. No, she didn't need to go so far to make things right. She would just discontinue the magick, was all.

No more spells.

But what else to do? She *dreaded* getting a job.

She wished all her problems would be over.

She wished really hard.

Her cell phone rang.

*** **

And so once again, quite unexpectedly, Tara Amadeo was invited to partake in her favorite passtime--dinner, preferably free. Actually, she was just invited to lunch, but when you're unemployed time has a way of dissolving and temporal designations meaningless. Dear Alex had received an inquiry as to the whereabouts of the now-nomad "ex-witch" and of course he just went and gave out the information, bless his fuzzy head. The caller in question could have been just about anybody: repo man, angry former client, demon incognito ready to pull her into the depths of hell and thus fulfill Molly Griep's many hopes and predictions. But annoyance at her former roommate's gullibility (or *was* it--did she really know Alexander Platt, or did she only know him partially or was her mind not big enough to encompass the entire tapestry of an individual?) aside, the point was moot. Free Food won out and so Tara stood in the doorway of a cheesy but upscale Itlaian restaurant, dressed in a wrinkled black tank-dress that she had unpacked after weeks of being crammed into her suitcase.

The squat, monobrowed *maitre d'* with steel grey hair and an ethnicity that wasn't exactly Italian but something indeterminate accosted Tara at the doorway, either noting her less than polished appearance with disapproval or staring at her titties.

"Hi, I'm looking for *Baxter*," she said in a defensive voice, hoping the name would carry some sort of weight around these parts. And indeed it did, because with a subservient dip of the short man's head and a placid, closed-mouth smile he led her to a table in the pasta joint's inner sanctum, past the terrible, almost unintentionally cubist frescos of plates of spaghetti and Mediterranean grottos that almost reminded her of the canvas monstrosity in her hotel room. There were even crudely-painted cherubs on the ceiling swishing in a sea of stars and bottles of red wine, and it was right after Tara, distracted by such trifles, stumbled on a carpeted step and immediately looked up to see what was in front of her

that she set eyes upon Pris Baxter for the first time.

Tara's first impression of Pris, serenely gazing back at the witch with only the slightest hint of a cocked eyebrow and a shadow of a smirk on her lips, was that she was absolutely perfect. *Perfect*. Not perfect in a subjective personal-demons sort of way (though that always plays a part), but literally flawless, but for perhaps a slight rodent-quality to her teeth. Unblemished white skin threw her jet-black pageboy and her blood-red mouth in stark relief, small hands pressed palm-to-palm and unusually long fingers well manicured tip to well-manicured tip. She wore a red suit with large padded-shoulders and two tight parallel rows of pearls ringing her neck like a choker. Elegant. *Moneyed*. Well-groomed. Which, once the drug of witnessing the rich wore off, immediately led to Tara's second impression--suspicion.

There was only one reason a woman like that would wish to share and pay for a supper with a person like Tara--and I'll tell you right now, it wasn't the promise of hot lesbian sex.

Pris got up and extended a suited arm towards the taller woman, her tiny hand engulfed in the witch's broad palm.

"So good to finally meet you, Ms. Amadeo," she said in a melodious, glass-like voice. "I'm Pris Baxter, Vice President of Dermaco International."

"Uh, thanks. Cool job."

"Thank-you," she replied confidently, "I like it."

Now Tara was even more suspicious and paranoid than ever. She had done magicks for some corporate types in the past, but none had been so bold or so high-ranking. Usually these were covert jobbies, certainly not meeting for a lunch date at a crowded midtown restaurant to discuss the finer points of hexing or the magickal applications of crabs. Tara studied the woman's pale doll's face as they both sat down and poster-sized laminated menus were placed before them. There was something odd about her, odder than the mere fact of her being upper management of a major company and yet seeking out the services of a skank like Tara. The witch's thoughts suddenly flipped back to that night after Kinky Witter died, when she was in the street upchucking crows and turtles and

looking up at God and inquiring if there was indeed more. This whole situation, before it ever really began or at least began to be sketched out, seemed to augur *complications*, complications even though she had finally packed it all in and announced to herself quite clearly:

No more complications

Was this to be the pattern of an entire life?

Tinny music in mono began to play throughout the restaurant, emanating from lint-encrusted ancient speakers. Tara thought it was a Musak version of “Perry Mason” by Ozzy Osbourne but couldn’t be sure. A waiter set two tall glasses of water and a basket of bread before the two women; he was also short, squat, dark, monobrowed, and of indistinct heritage.

Pris smoothed a white linen napkin over her lap and smiled.

“Let’s just get to it, shall we?”

Tara dug into the basket, pulled out a pumpernickel roll the size of a grapefruit, and began hastily to butter, her mouth watering at the impending carb-orgy.

“Sure,” the witch replied through a mouthful of bread, “what’s on your mind? Product testing? You have free samples? I think I could use some *foundation...*” she drew down one of her dark lower eyelids with a finger. “I think I could probably use some foundation. Powder. Concealer.”

“Hm,” Pris said, frowning, leaning in slightly and scrutinizing Tara’s face. Her ice-blue eyes were penetrating, focused like the lenses of an expensive microscope, and Tara actually felt goosebumps raise on her arms and the back of her neck--which was no fair, because “spooky” was her job. “Perhaps a Seaweed-Coconut Exfoliant Mask. No, definitely the mask. And you’d need an entire sebaceous-matter removal session at one of the Dermaco spas. *God...what do you eat?*”

“Okay,” Tara answered, raising her index finger, “the thing about the foundation and concealer? Purely being a wiseass, wasn’t serious. What is the *real* reason you called me--see, *now* I’m being serious.”

Pris brought the glass of water up to her lips, barely tilted it, then brought it down

again.

“I would like to offer you a job.”

“Well, you caught me at a weird time right now...see, I don’t do that stuff anymore.”

“It pays very well.”

Tara tried to quell the rising tide of greed within her with images of Rache gutting some innocents.

“I...really...can’t. It’s just a principle thing.”

That faint, haughty smirk again appeared on Pris’s face. She grabbed a knife and began buttering a breadstick.

“What type of job do you exactly think I’m offering you, Ms. Amadeo?”

“You know what job.”

“I’m offering you a position at Dermaco.”

Tara worked on another roll, pulling the lid off of a small plastic butter container but never taking her eyes off of the striking little woman.

“You mean a *job* job?”

“Yes.”

“*Why?*”

“You’re very talented.”

“Talented how?”

“Talented. I’ve been looking for a woman of your particular talents.”

Tara stuffed the roll in her mouth, biting out a large V-shaped section and chasing it with the ice water.

“You make me sound like sex professional.”

“I assure you, sex has nothing to do with this.”

“Well great, now I’m disappointed.”

What the fuck is wrong with me, Tara asked herself. *Some money, some power, a pair of blue eyes, and suddenly I’m all lesbiano.*

“Would you be disappointed with 60K?”

“All at once?”

“A year. Plus benefits.”

C'mon, keep thinking about the Horror, keep thinking about that swath of chaos and destruction caused by your mag--

"Dental?"

"Full benefits."

"And what do I have to do?"

"You do what you do."

"You got enemies?"

"I'm one of three VPs of a major company with a host of young go-getters nipping at my heels and a selection of old-timers who feel agitated and not a little resentful at my ascent. I simply want what they all want. I see the disadvantages, the chinks in the armor, the potential backstabbers."

"Then why don't *you* go stab some backs?"

"Tempting. But I don't do that sort of thing anymore."

"But it's okay for me to?"

"It wouldn't be personal if you did it. Besides, you'd be an *employee*."

Tara rested her chin in her hand and tore her eyes away from Pris, fixing them instead on an oversized jar of roasted red peppers in an alcove. Manic fantasies involving money, prestige, and licking expensive shoes danced in her head, multiplying and crowding out her hard-won grabs at nobility and reform. She couldn't back down now--she had gone so far! The way she handled Myra, for instance--defusing the situation and restoring order to what once was chaos. And putting all those books and instruments in storage and losing her home and just willingly stepping into the void, trusting in God to take care of her as she made her journey--just like Jules in *Pulp Fiction* did (just like Caine from *Kung-Fu*).

On the other hand, to speak of God and to speak of morality--what about the whole thing with Alex? Here she thought he was the nicest guy in the world, her best friend, the Frick to her Frack, all that was good in humanity--and then it turned out that she really hadn't been so irreplaceable to him, so dear, after all, not when the money flow ended. She still hadn't recovered from that shitty how-do-you-do. The last seven years or so of her life had been a series of

disillusionments and burnt bridges. Malcolm Dust--who taught her a hell of a lot and should have been the graying old mentor that she looked up to like Gandalf or Obi-Wan--totally couldn't stand her. Molly Griep not only tried to kill her but was absolutely convinced she was the *Antichrist* or some bullshit--yeah, she managed to piss off that bitch right well. Then Alex. Three fucking blonds. No more blonds. So now she was going to try her luck with a brunette. Besides, she felt herself inexplicably drawn towards the woman. It was some golden shit that reflected off her eyes, the sort of shit you can't quite see but feel. It just made her feel so...*reasonable*.

At some point during the remainder of the conversation Tara realized that Pris Baxter was a vampire. Maybe it was the way she played with her food but never really ate anything. Or the pointy white tips of her fangs that very subtly popped in and out of view as she talked. The thin band of pure white in-between her neck and pearls, a white far paler than was fashionable or possible through the palette of a mainstream cosmetics company. Or maybe Tara always knew she was a vampire, from the very start; maybe this--what was sitting across from her and signing the credit card receipt just handed to her in the sumptuous leather folder--was what vampires really were, or could be. But she no longer cared. And she really wasn't convinced that she ever really cared or was truly reformed in any way to begin with. In her life she had seen so precious few that were truly noble--she doubted it was really part of the human condition, and if nobility was not really the purview of humans, what made them so much more better than vampires? Even the unfortunate members of the Invisible College--if a simple biological abnormality introduced into the bloodstream transformed them into amoral killers at the drop of a hat, how weak and how fleeting this notion of character, of basic identity. Character, nobility, ethics, identity, morality--concepts unstable and unreliable, certainly not immortal, as vampires were.

So the witch never mentioned the vampire thing, though she suspected Pris knew she knew--but as long as Tara didn't blanch, didn't run out of the restaurant, didn't break off a table leg and stake the woman through the heart, then it was assumed that everything was cool.

But Tara promised herself she wouldn't tolerate any killing, or biting.

Okay, maybe some biting.

Pris tossed her a wad of cash before they parted and asked her to make herself presentable. Actually, she ordered Tara to make herself presentable.

Full dental.

*** **

When Pris and Tara strode past the framed posters of various shadow-cheeked models bedecked in dark eyeshadow or green seaweed-avocado masks and into the glass conference room of Dermaco, they almost looked exactly the same--you know, in the superfcials. They had the same pageboy haircut, one in black and one in brown. They wore a similar cut of skirted suit--the vampire's in red and the witch's in black. They both wore heels--which accounted for Tara's wobbling as she tried to maneuver herself to the head of the table, where Pris already was. A sea of well-groomed corporate types looked up at the pair, inscrutable expressions of neither interest nor boredom nor welcoming fixed upon their faces. The only thing that distinguished any of the seated from each other, besides gender and slight variations in apparent age, was that several looked a little paler, a little more perfect, a bit more red on the lip and finely traced around the eyes and nostrils than the others. And Tara thought, *fuck, they're vampires too*. Just how many of them were at Dermaco? And the killing--they must be killing people to survive. Tara couldn't abet this sort of behavior. Not even for full dental. But now she was trapped within the gray-carpeted confines of the glass conference room, her nose inundated with the smell of coffee and the strong odor of artificial fruit-scent that overlapped the very faintest (you'd miss it if you weren't paying attention) whiff of death.

Just then, Tara caught a glimpse of her tall frame mirrored in the glass, and became so completely distracted by how hot she looked (albeit in a fascist sort of way), that she forgot everything she was just thinking about. Which was just as well, since such seditious ideas had no place in the boardroom.

“Hi, everyone,” Pris’s bell-like voice intoned brightly, making the glass walls hum. “I’ve got to run for a meeting about the Victorian-Allure-in-a-Bag launch, but I just wanted to introduce you all to my new assistant--Amanda Tarantino.”

The crowd sitting around the table said simultaneous in a voice that was neither welcoming nor bored nor hostile nor particularly enthusiastic, through strangely synchronous:

“Hi, Amanda.”

*** **

Tara sat before Pris’s silver-and-Lucite desk, and the seat was rather low, and Pris appeared rather big. Tara looked down at the maroon carpeting under the desk and for the first time noticed her new boss’ shoes, little black strappy things with spike heels that seemed impossible. They were the type of footwear that appeared to be at the same time flimsy and prohibitively expensive. It was a fucking shoe fetish that just grabbed Tara by the short hairs, was what it was, another recent fetish to add to her power fetish and money fetish and newly acquired Ilsa Queen of the SS fetish. The witch never thought corporate life could be so kinky.

Pris was going through the motions of reapplying the beige Victorian Allure lotion on her cheeks and forehead and the back of her neck with a sponge, tipping the small, pink-and-black bottle liberally and applying its contents in quick, numerous, staccato movements. Tara sensed the inherent urgency of such a procedure, how unlike the vampire’s other actions this one was accomplished with a certain degree of vulnerability written on her face. The sun that shone through the windows behind her--windows which virtually consisted of most of the wall space for two adjacent sides of the room. That noon-day light would have just fried her, was it not for the lotion. The strangeness of being a vampire out in the open, in the human world, the human world with its lighted billboards and lines of cars and trucks snaking down Broadway, the essence of Times

Square summed up in a gigantic animated Ramen Noodles sign at its very crossroads, all lights and noise even at such an early time of the day--

Pris tossed the used sponge in the silver mesh wastepaper basket and regarded Tara with a squinty scrutiny.

"Wasn't Dermaco Spa supposed to shape your eyebrows as well?"

"Yeah, well, after the sebaceous intervention with the scoops and suction I just kinda decided to save some goodness for next time." Tara motioned to herself. "But how 'bout the rest--*pretty good*, huh?"

Pris nodded at her, the very hint of her elongated canines showing under her upper lip.

"Yes, quite decent." She then unlocked a file cabinet under her desk, pulled out a large manila folder, and handed it to Tara. "You should find everything you need in here. Remember the somewhat porky older man with the Grecian Formula hair and the David Niven-cum-Hitler mustache that was sitting towards the back? Barclay Desjardins. Catty fucking cocksucker," she said evenly, as if listing his rank and achievements. "VP. Been gunning for me ever since I came here. Used to ask me for oral when I was but a slip of a girl in the typing pool. Always said I didn't have what it took to make it, even as I made it. I know he'd love to see me brought low, destroyed. Shitty cocksucking human. Cocksucker. You've got handwriting, photographs, even hair samples from his trash. Cocksucking bastard."

It was odd hearing Pris repeatedly call someone a cocksucker but still look composed as if giving a PowerPoint presentation. Tara pushed her index finger in the folder and flipped through the contents. *Amazing*, she thought. *Just like the friggin' CIA.*

"Just out of curiosity--you ever file charges on him?"

Pris threw her head back and let out a peal of spontaneous crystalline laughter.

"What, you mean like for *sexual harassment*? So I could have my character assassinated and be labeled a 'troublemaker' and be reassigned to our satellite branch in Duluth under the pretense all upper management wanted to do

was 'protect' me from him? What a joke...the livelihood and dignity of some lowly file clerk or junior associate has no value in comparison to that of a Vice President, to a personal friend of CEO "Baby" Bersee himself. Sure, I could have filed something, hired a lawyer but by doing so I'd have to give up everything--maybe even enter a new field completely. No, the rules they play by here...it's their own rules, just like vampire rules are their own rules, the rules of the clan. And so let them play by their own clan rules...and I'll play by mine. Or by *yours*, specifically. *Obliterate him.*" By this point the petite vampire's face had become grim, had been becoming steadily grimmer with every word, and now her face looked positively forbidding, a stone-faced mask of vengeance...Tara wondered uneasily if she was thus witnessing the *real* Pris Baxter, the face she used when fully exercising the full extent of her vampire power.

"Oooh-kay. But I can't *kill* him or anything like that."

"I'm not asking for death--just destruction. How long will it take?"

"It's not an exact science. But you'll know."

The noonday sun hit the window in its full heat, and Pris was bathed in an aura of light. Little beads of moisture bubbled up on her forehead, dissolving the lotion and revealing slightly the true ivory of the skin underneath. She instinctively reached for the Victorian Allure, but held back from applying it.

"What will you...ask for, exactly? To happen to him?"

"Safest and easiest bet is to play upon his karmic weaknesses," Tara said with the technical savvy of a computer programmer. "I'm going to use magick, via the concept of like attracts like (vis a vis personal and bodily effects) to influence his karma to 'tip,' as it were. Quite simply--whatever skeletons he has hiding in his closets will suddenly shake the sleep out of their eyes and roam the Earth for all to see." Tara leaned cockily back in her small chair and couldn't help but revel in the impending chaos of it all and the look of approval and anticipation in Pris's ice-blue eyes. "It's the coolest way to hex, leprosy-fee."

Pris dug another sponge out of her desk but kept her eyes on Tara.

"Though a few lepers in a company like Dermaco would carry its own degree of irony, would it not?"

“So would a VP with her face on fire.”

“No worry about that,” the vampire replied, reapplying more lotion on the back of her neck. “Victorian Allure is one of the most reliable protectants there is. That’s why it’s the Undead’s underground favorite.”

“Speaking of which...uh...I can’t be involved in any, uh, *feedings* or anything.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Pris matter-of-factly, “we need to keep you healthy for your job.”

“No, that’s not exactly what I mean--though, like, I do appreciate the “no-feeding-on-me” concept too, don’t get me wrong. I mean--I’m real uncomfortable about the whole vampires-hunting-humans things. Had a couple of bad past experiences. To be frank, it’s been giving me misgivings about working here ever since our first meeting. I don’t want to be a party to that stuff.”

“Tara--*Amanda*--don’t you know about Clan Generra?”

The witch rubbed her left eye.

“That’s like, roleplaying or something?”

“That’s what I am--I am Generra. Vampires have clans--organizations of like-minded individuals. Like political parties or the Knights of Columbus, though a bit more...intimate. The two major clans in New York City are Generra and The Caress. Caress are freaks, whores, and indiscriminate killers. Generra is committed to a peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence with humanity.” A beatific look appeared on Pris’s face as if she just described the rights of Americans under the Constitution. Outside, Tara could hear the crowds, the cars, the alarms, things one usually funnels out of one ears during the course of a conversation--but now they were strangely intrusive, almost a musical accompaniment to Pris’s words. Her words--they were intriguing. Tara wondered if they were true. It would have been intriguing if it was true, and even more intriguing if it was just an elaborate lie--because the witch always found the elaborate, colossal liars and lies of the world fascinating in their excess and evil. But if it was really true, then the witch could work virtually karma-free, just tripping up some shady business-types who probably had it coming to them

anyway.

Full dental.

“So you’re saying that...you guys don’t feed off of humans?”

“It’s against the policies of the official Clan Generra Handbook.”

“Then what do you eat?”

“As I have been lecturing to the vampire community for years, there are many *perfectly good* sources of plasma that are non-lethal to humans.”

“You mean medical blood and animals and stuff?”

“Of course.”

“Can you, like, slit a rat’s throat and fill a wine glass with its blood and then drink it and then laughingly toss the glass into the roaring fireplace?”

“Get to work.”

*** **

Tara Amadeo, a.k.a. Amanda Tarantino, found herself the possessor of many an idle hour in her new position, having performed the actual hexes in question back at the hotel room. But at least, Tara thought, as she played Plinko on her computer, she had a nice, private office to perform the nothing in. Though it was rather dull, what with the bullet-gray metal file cabinets full of office supplies and reference books on cosmetology and marketing, and some snoozers of wall decoration, framed ads for Dermaco products. The one for Victorian Allure wasn’t bad, with the emaciated chick in the bustier sitting on the swing set with the curious black sheep sniffing her butt. Tara had many many hours to stare at it (*many* hours), and few visitors, as she wasn’t quite plugged into the matrix of Dermaco and yet was employed by Pris Baxter to karmically undermine its very structure.

She had forgotten all about Rache, and Kinky Witter, and Alex and Armand and the rest, forgotten about that former life that seemed to have been lopped off like a withered, petrified limb. Instead, Tara grappled with weightier issues, such as what exactly to do with this new infusion of cash. And how she

might maneuver things eventually to get an office with a window. And she knew, Pris was angling to be President/CEO of Dermaco one day, though she scrupulously never mentioned the topic (as if she might jinx her chances?). Perhaps Tara, as Amanda, would follow her up the ranks, be VP one day. VP of...*nothing*.

Or--

VP of Hexes and Witchcraft.

Every company should have one, Tara thought smugly as she plinked her last plink and soaked in the electronic winner's music. She shook her fist in victory and spun around on her ergonomic chair:

"Yes--I rule!"

On the second spin she noticed the young man standing in the doorway. At first glance he seemed rather attractive--tall, black wavy hair, dark eyes, soap-opera actor looks and a dimple in his chin. Then he opened his mouth.

"Are you having fun?" he asked in that bitchy way that didn't wear too good on a heterosexual male.

What the fuck--

"Hi!" Tara shouted, her teeth gritted in a phony smile she put to good use in the office. "I don't believe we've met!"

The man matched her smile with one of equal caliber and stepped into her office uninvited. Well, Tara thought, at least I know he isn't one of the vampires.

"I'm Glenn Mandible. Sales. And you must be Amanda, Pris's new Assistant."

"Sure am," Tara perkily replied, her smile stock still, her hands covertly clicking closed the Plinko window and opening a spreadsheet.

"It's *funny*," Glenn said in his New Jersey Girl's accent. "I didn't think Pris was going to need a new assistant anymore, what with the secretaries and all. Though she's had other assistants before."

"Oh?" Tara's mind flashed to what she assumed were personal items of a predecessor that she found in the file cabinets--a hairbrush, a mirror, a pack of sanitary napkins.

“Yeah, but she never seems to have a lot of luck with them. The last one just up and disappeared several months ago--Pris said she had to move Upstate to live near her dying mother.”

Or maybe Pris ATE her, Tara mused sardonically.

“Wow, that’s really sad! Well, everything’s pretty great here, so I can’t complain.”

Glenn flipped his long wavy bangs back in a motion that Tara thought was either incredibly conceited or just plain faggy. If he didn’t talk or move much he’d probably be a decent lay.

“So...what is it you *do* here, anyway?”

“Spreadsheets, Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint,” Tara answered, reading the different applications off her computer screen.

“Well, I must give you credit for choosing to work with Pris.” he spoke in a throaty whisper. “She’s a little bitc--you know, *opinionated*. Bossy. A little crazy, hormonal. You know...hahaha.”

He spoke to her in that clubby, confiding way as if she were one of the young, corporate, and rabidly ambitious, speaking to her as if she wasn’t Tara the Witch, as if Pris was not the Vampire. In his own pseudo-world of copying machines, TRS reports, bad coffee, and phantom promotions. *Dick*.

“Teehee,” Tara politely and timidly whispered back behind her hand like a Japanese stewardess, as if she actually empathized with what this load was talking about. “You so funny! But seriously, Pris is really very good to me.”

Glenn walked up to the witch and patted her convivially on the back, his sweaty hand lingering on the bas-relief of her bra-strap.

“Well, *anyway*--welcome aboard, Amanda. Can I call you *Mandy*--are you ever insulted by people calling you that, do you mind if I call you that?”

Fucker.

“Sure, that’s fine!”

“Sweet! Well, we must do lunch sometime.” (Hand still on her bra-strap, doing this queer little focused Shiatsu massage bullshit...Tara wondered if she should ask him to pop that boil on her lower left shoulder blade while he was in

the area.) “Do you do *sushi*?”

“I’ve been known to chow down on it from time to time.”

“Sweet! By the way, did you hear about Desjardins?” Glenn’s eyes joyously twinkled in the excitement of a good gossip.

“No.”

“The word in the halls is he’s got until noon, then...” he made a cutting motion across his neck.

“Jeepers.”

“I’m going to miss, him, though. He was my *boss*, after all.”

*** **

The termination of Barclay Desjardins was privately celebrated between the hours of 6 and 8 PM by Pris Baxter, Tara Amadeo, and a bottle of champagne that Pris would never drink. Of course, Tara couldn’t properly celebrate the sacking of Desjardins, since she hardly knew the man, the intimacy she had with a few strands of his fakely black hair and a greasy post-it note notwithstanding. But she could share in the general sense of chaos that pervaded a fairly large, browbeaten establishment such as Dermaco when such an event took place--the gaiety of the pencil-pushers, suddenly brought to life just like the sweat-shop workers at the end of *The Wiz*, enthusiastically spreading the news in hushed tones of Desjardin’s demise, and the conscientious secretaries rushing back to their desks to update the phone lists and erase his name from the databases...

Tara fairly *ate* the chaos, savoring the taste in her mouth, and her few weeks of contrition for her wicked wicked ways aside, she felt no pull to counteract the buzz and feelings of security and wealth this entire situation gave her. Besides, Desjardins, by all accounts, was an asshole, so he deserved it. Imagine--five sexual harassment complaints by past and present employees of Dermaco all being called in to the poor beleaguered HR department at the same time! *Whaaat a fucking coinkydink*, gloated the witch to herself. *But of course*,

according to the Amazing Randi, it's all just fucking coinkydinks--which leaves me off the hook. (She accepted the Vampire's offer of more champagne.)

Desjardins was only getting his just desserts, a bit of justice in a lawless land--the witch was merely a karmic warrior in a \$60 Macy's business suit.

The sun had gone down on Manhattan and the lights of Times Square were out in full force, and the City seemed so sexy to Tara in her inebriated state, bathing in the glory of Pris's approbation.

"*Cocksucker*," Pris said to the air, to the invisible effigy of Barclay Desjardins, her face beaming, her blood-red lips outstretched as far as they could go and the fangs reflecting light. Tara tore her eyes away from her lust for the City (all of it, just fucking all of it) and regarded her boss.

"He was one of the *bad guys*, huh?"

"The worst. How I fucking hated him. And when I rose up the ranks and became his equal--his so-called equal, because truly Bersee never saw it that way--I still hated him, wanted to *slay* the cocksucker." Pris had folded up her arms as she spoke, holding one arm bent up at the elbow so she could shake her little balled hand.

"Why didn't you?" Tara asked as she slurped up more champagne from the long, thin glass. "I mean, at least scare him a little bit or intimidate him with your vampireness--"

"*Nobody knows I'm a vampire here*," Pris sharply interjected, turning around and fixing her ice-blue eyes upon Tara's brown ones. "Except for a few. I try to give my own kind a break...and *promote* others. But coming out to Dermaco as a whole? No. Not for a good long while." The vampire looked away and out into the Times Square night, her image reflected in the glass. "I always wanted to."

Tara, beverage in hand (as it had been non-stop since six o'clock), stood next to her; she shuddered slightly at the recognition that Pris's image showed in the window beside her own.

"You...you *reflect*."

"Hm?" Pris said absently, without turning around.

"You cast a reflection."

"Of course I do. How do you think I got my picture on the ID card?"

"Yeah, but--vampires aren't *supposed* to do that. I thought."

Pris faced Tara, her familiar subtle smirk returning.

"Tara. *Amanda*." She put her cold hand on the witch's arm, sending a chill through the rayon material that sank to the bone and then was very quietly followed by the strangest sensation. "We're not a book. We're not a movie. We're *here*, in the flesh--more or less. And we're *complicated*."

"I'm complicated too."

"How complicated could *you* be?" Pris asked, suddenly appearing four inches closer to the witch without apparent movement. "You don't drink blood, after all."

"Drinking blood," Tara replied, leaning in to receive the Vampire's mouth, "that would be *easy*."

When the witch woke up late that night in her hotel room bed, her work clothes still on and a massive hangover throbbing in her ears, she thought,
I'm a bossfucker. And a lesbian. And a--

She put her hand on her neck and felt it up, stopping when she was convinced that she wasn't bitten.

And that's ALL I am.

The next morning, she carefully examined her body in the bath to make doubly sure.

*** **

It was soon apparent that Pris had no intention of stopping at Desjardins. After helping her get rid of another higher-up that had personally insulted her on several occasions and started rumors that she fucked "Baby" Bersee to get where she was (which was impossible because Bersee was a big flaming queen if ever there was one), the vampire set her sights on strategic rather than defensive hexes. Some followed Desjardins in the sacking department--all sorts of lovely scandals including more sexual harassment, embezzlement of funds, an

off-color joke about Asian titties, and even child porn on a worker's hard drive. And all of it karma come back to haunt them at the most *inopportune* time, in the most indiscrete of ways. Others, a lucky few, had gentler exits--suddenly getting sweet job offers from other firms, unexpected pregnancies, a sudden urge to teach handicapped baboons how to ride specially built tricycles, etc. And with every departure, with every going-away party or ignominious escorting from their desks by security, Pris Baxter was one step closer to what she ultimately wanted--which was to be in a position where she could live out her vampiressness with impunity, without the need to hide. It was a long, multi-step path she had laid out for herself. Tara wondered if she would be there to see how it would all end.

The witch often thought about, on those few occasions she emerged from her office to steal a box of pens or buy a candy bar from the vending machine, whether the other workers were "on" to her, on to the many ways in which Tara's presence in the halls of Dermaco was highly irregular, as were a lot of other things. Even "Baby" Bersee himself, decked out like Gene Kelly in "Xanadu," a more liberal user of his company's products than many women there--he who both was so friendly and so genuine and yet unintentionally made you feel like you were the living embodiment of the term "little person," as if you were frickin' Billy Barty standing there, extending to you his jewel-dripping Liberace hand--even Bersee seemed completely, blissfully clueless to the fact that more and more of his employees were walking around wearing sunglasses indoors. There were some fresh vampiric faces in the office--some new altogether and some familiar but turned. Tara pondered the ethics of turning, if it was on the same level of immorality as simply attacking and killing. Obviously the recipients of that Gift, at least at Dermaco, seemed to invite and welcome it--after all, it did seem to signify a promotion of some kind.

But what of the larger question? The one Tara tried to suppress and sweep under the carpet like Oscar Madison but that kept crawling out?

*** **

Pris had left her Blackberry in Tara's office and so the witch decided to do a good turn and get off her ass and actually do something. She had tracked the Vampire to another floor and a conference room right off Advertising. Unlike the one where "Amanda" was introduced, this room was completely closed in and a pair of black doors with silver handles greeted her. Tara wiped some sweat from her brow (this was the first time she had moved away from her computer screen and Plinko since the morning) and carefully grabbed the door handle and pushed down--

She had seen far enough into the room to notice the half-naked woman on the long table and the workers, male and female, who were holding her down and crowding her. Then a cold hand grabbed the witch's wrist tightly and pulled her into the room with one quick motion, immediately followed by the slamming of the door and the turn of the lock.

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"Uh...what the fuck is going on here, Pris?"

The petite vampire with the severe black pageboy stood at the far side of the room, almost in the corner, one small white hand gripping for support the heavy mauve curtain that covered the wall-sized projection screen. That little hand held tightly to the thick textured fabric, swaying in tension; the hinge of her mouth was slightly slack, red lips frozen in apprehension. At the sound of Tara's voice she wrenched her eyes from the terrified figure on the table--a young bottle-blond that the witch recognized from the halls--and bored them into the irises of her assistant. Tara cringed at the golden light that instinctually flexed out of Pris's eyes, that light that tried to short-circuit explanation, the light that sought to be so very *reasonable*, the light that apparently failed to assuage the mind of the chick held down to the long, oval table by a chorus of white hands, that plugged her mouth shut with cold palms, that had managed to tear off her pink suit jacket and rip open her white blouse, exposing the B-cups of her plain beige bra and nipples hard with fear--

“Pris--*cut it out!*” Tara growled, tearing her face away from the vampire and shielding her eyes with her arm.

“Y-you have to understand, Tara...”

“*Amanda...*”

Pris let out a metallic, nervous laugh.

“No worries about keeping appearances here, love--we’re all vampires.”

The witch hesitantly uncovered her eyes and quickly surveyed the others in the room. Most were familiar faces--only a few she remembered as being originally Undead. And now--the change in the faces of the formerly human, sharp white teeth clearly visible in their mouths as they congregated around the unlucky mortal female, looking upon her naked chest and neck with a degree of lust and hunger that reminded the witch of her experience with Marta and Rache, and Armand and the others. Tara could empathize (to her a strange, oft-neglected emotion) with what this victim must have been going through, what was running like a freight train in her mind, being reduced in the eyes of the nominally-alive creatures to the status of a slab of sirloin--

“Would you guys be *finishing her off* now if I didn’t come here?!”

“She was going to *expose* us,” Pris snapped back, her eyes watery as if she had just been hurt--hurt by the witch’s accusation, hurt by the impending chaos that lay in wait in this one conference room, chaos that threatened to ruin her and everything she built just like it obliterated Desjardins. “What do you expect me to do? Have you no idea how serious this is? For *both* of us?”

“Don’t lump *me* into this, *kemo sabe*.”

Pris gripped the curtain in her hand tighter, exposing the sliver of white screen beneath.

“*We’re in this together*, Tara.”

At Pris’s words the witch felt as if her world had been reduced to the size of a TV-sized frame, it made her silently choke on her own spit. *We’re in this together*. A kaleidoscope of different emotions filled her all at once--suffocation, fear, annoyance, and flattery. Before she knew what happened, she had become thoroughly entangled in this vampire’s world--and by association, in the world of

all vampires. And how much different was she, Tara, than that of the shaking woman held down the table, her eyes rolling in terror?

Yes, how much *different*--

Tara pushed past the vampires, ignoring the way they bristled and hissed around her, how they protectively closed in on their prey.

"Pris, let me get near her," Tara said confidently, folding back one of her sleeves. "You want her not to talk, she won't talk. In fact, she won't remember this entire damn day, if you want."

The vampire narrowed her eyes and scrutinized the witch for any signs of dissembling.

"*How?*"

"I'll give her amnesia--you forget, 'love,' I'm a *witch* after all. Better start earning my keep. And have your goons put her shirt back on--going to ruin the effect if she's got her boobies hanging out."

Pris nodded reluctantly to the other vampires, silently communicating to the Hive, directly to their brains and overriding their protests. The suited vamps backed away from the body in profound disappointment, a few eyeing daggers at the witch whose approach stopped the victim in their very birth of her scream, in the first scrambles to get off the table and flee. Tara extended a bare arm and gently but firmly pushed the woman back down by her forehead, back against the mahogany surface, letting the magick pour forth, letting the energy delete the entire episode, wiping clean the magnetic tape of memory. Suddenly the woman's face relaxed and her eyes went glassy--

"Okay, now help her up, fix her hair, and get her out the door. Walk her to a restroom if possible, and plunk her ass in a stall. I've built in a slight lead time with her, but she's going to get lucid real soon." Then the witch called out to the two female vamps that ushered their former snack away with pouting, regretful faces: "*And stick your teeth in your mouth, dammit!*"

The other vampires, groaning and moaning as if their team lost the baseball game, picked up their clipboards and paper cups of coffee and filed out of the room. Some, realizing that they had no more reason to drink, as they were

vampires, dumped their cups in the metal mesh wastebasket on their way. Pris quickly followed them out the door, ignoring Tara's look, telling her gruffly:

"I'll see you in my office in ten minutes."

And the witch just stood in the empty room, noting the several overturned chairs, a sea of spilt coffee on the carpeting, some leaves of abandoned paper that had been blown across the room.

Me no speaka the English, kemo sabe, Tara thought.

*** **

When the witch arrived at Pris's office the door was closed. Tara had become wary of closed doors in Dermaco--who *knew* what was happening behind them, and how large the vampire population of the work staff was presently.

Fucking vampires.

She knocked on the black door tentatively, and waited. A faint murmur of "wait" sounded on the other side, immediately followed by the sound of unlocking and the click of the doorknob. Pris was expressionless as she bid her assistant to enter and take a seat in the small chair.

The vampire leaned back in her seat and pressed her palms and fingertips together.

"Well," she said with a strained smile, "we've had quite a day today. Haven't we?"

Tara crossed her legs and tried to appear nonchalant.

"Yeah. Well, you know...*yeah*."

The two studied each other in silence. The sounds of the maelstrom outside the window were clearly audible, and became louder and more insistent as the silence between the two occupants of the room grew. The witch picked a string off her skirt. Suddenly, Pris, like a bad film edit, was sitting at the edge of her desk in front of Tara.

"Would you like a raise?"

“*Why*,” randomly replied the witch, shifting her eyes so she wasn’t face-to-face with the vampire’s red satin panties, “you think it would shut me up? Why go through all the trouble? Why not simply get your undead cronies to liquidate me and stuff my body in the utility closet? Then you could tell everybody that I suddenly resigned because I had to live with my ailing grand-aunt in Peoria”

Pris was now, without a second’s warning, at the window, her back turned to Tara. She looked oddly tall when she was alone.

“You really think I’m a *monster*, don’t you?”

“I...I mean, Pris: how many people have you killed in your life?”

“*Countless*,” she answered in a low, somewhat defiant voice. “But what did you expect? A vampire to do? *Hmm?*”

“But what about the *animals*,” the witch asked, getting out of her seat. “What about the *handbook?*”

“A relatively recent development,” the vampire answered, still looking out the window, her arms folded and her body doubled in the glass. “At least I’ve *tried*--tried without having a truly good reason to. Tried based on my own convictions and sense of morality, not slavishly following the dictates of some fairytale the humans mindlessly follow. Surely there is some room in your jaded heart to give me points for that. And while we are on the subject, Tara: how many people have you hexed in your life?”

“Hexing’s not killing,” the witch replied sheepishly.

“It’s still the ruination of a life--only vampires do it nice and quick, and in person. Vampires are not shy in revealing themselves to their victims--they want their faces to be the last thing a human sees, the coming out to the individual--the naked display of one’s one vampire nature--being almost as important and as wonderful as the feed itself. *Almost.*”

Tara sighed deeply and plopped back in her chair, her head in her hands.

“Well *shit*, Pris--I tried to go straight, before you dragged me back in--“

“*Fuck going straight!*” the vampire snarled, now suddenly kneeling before Tara, her white cold hands on her stockinged knees. “We should be allowed to be who we *are*, to live out our own natures!”

Tara looked up and yelled in the vampire's face.

"But I don't want to hurt anybody!"

"Really?"

"Yes--really."

"But didn't you tell me that your powers feed off of chaos? Isn't chaos a natural part of life? Isn't death a natural part of life? Like a tsunami or a volcano?"

The witch tore away from Pris's electric touch and her seat and headed for the window. She felt like pushing the fucking glass and just sailing out.

"I'm--not--a--volcano! I'm a 28-year-old woman living in a fucking hotel room! You're telling me we're in this together, but I got other plans, Pris. I want a family and some fucking stability in my life, and I want it soon! I'm not an immortal like you are. I'm just...I'm just *tired* of this shit!' She pressed her knuckles into the glass lightly. "Fuck!"

The witch's spine shot up in energy as she felt Pris's arm go around her waist.

"I want some stability too, Tara," she said softly. "That's why I'm doing all of this. It's the best I can do. I need money. I need money in order to live this moral life, to get the supplies I need to do so. I have a competitive nature, and I need challenges and accomplishments. That's why I'm in Business. I need to excel. I need to. And so I'm trying to do the best I can. When I see a human--an unworthy, braying, banal human especially--threaten all of this, all I built, threaten to bleat and sniffle to the human world about my true nature, holding up that nature as if it was trash, a perversion, garbage--I just get very angry, that's all. It doesn't seem fair. This world doesn't seem equitable. When the wondrous ones, the ones with the gifts and the talents, when they are marginalized and forced to hide, and banality is so very treasured and encouraged to roam free--no, it isn't equitable. And even among my clan circles, among those that share my life circumstance--even with my own brother--I had been unable to find anyone to have such a conversation with, a person that truly *understands*--until I met you."

"So are we going to fuck now or what?"

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Tara's past loves flipped through her mind as she stared at the ceiling and felt the cold, tight body of the vampire dry-hump her. Actually, most of the persons she categorized as "past lovers" in her mind didn't actually give her sex. They were just strong personalities and attachments that had an extended stay in her life only to be ripped away untimely, the bond perverted and broken, the bridges napalmed. All the real fucks she got in her life were anonymous, and they had their momentary charms, but not unlike masturbation. Where did Pris fall into this scheme? She was a vampire, so obviously things weren't going to work out. Then again, Tara was a witch, and life was absurd, so maybe things *could* work out. Maybe they could grow old together in some lesbian conclave in Park Slope or Provincetown. Actually, Pris would *never* grow old. And the question had to be asked--was the vampire even the monogamous type? The Undead never struck Tara as being particularly faithful. And perhaps, in the end, this was nothing more than a good old-fashioned exchange of goods--magick for money, with sex as the lubricant. And after all--there was no margin for sentimentality in either the business or, she assumed, the vampire world--

But Pris certainly worked a good nipple.

"Oh God--Pris, that's so *good*...yeah...no, not the teeth...*Pris*...OW!"

Tara suddenly sat up, her heavy breasts sticking out of her unbuttoned shirt, Pris crouched over her, her skirt unzipped and down around her ankles--the vampire's eyes so deep and wide and unfathomable, like space--and a pair of long, needle-like fangs sticking out of her saliva-slick mouth.

"*We could be sisters!*" Pris exclaimed, lunging for Tara's neck. The witch kicked her in the chest with her shoeless nyloned feet and scuttered across the carpet on her ass. The tiny woman huddled in a dejected, unkempt bundle on the floor, pleading to the witch with her red, thin, downturned lips. "You could be immortal! It would be the security you craved, for *real*!"

"Pris," Tara answered breathlessly, buttoning up her shirt, "I can hardly handle the life I got allotted to me now. I wouldn't know what the fuck to do with

immortality. I'm not mentally built for it. When I die, I just want to be dead, you know?"

"What's so good," Pris whined, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped sloppily around them, "about being dead?"

Tara looked past the vampire to the metal-and-mesh bookshelf against the wall; the shelf stocked with massive, telephone book sized tomes, binders, cosmetic samples, and Lucite awards.

"It's just that--maybe then--I'd get some *rest*."

END OF BOOK TWO